

Merton's 'True Spirit' or a Calculated 'Official Pedestal'?

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When St. Thomas himself was put on an official pedestal ('a statement is proved true if it is shown to have been made by St. Thomas') the people who put him there proved, by that fact, that they were alien to his true spirit. I do not say that the Church proposed him as an authority: the real sense of the Church's approval of St. Thomas was simply that he was designated as a model and guide for philosophers and theologians. But certain textbooks made him purely and simply an authority – and nothing could be better calculated to undermine his teaching.¹

The 'St Thomas' referred to in this quotation is Thomas Aquinas and *not* Thomas Merton. Merton's reflections about other personalities often prove highly autobiographical; he unwittingly offers to readers a mirror in which to glimpse some notable's shared characteristic, a common temperament, a mutual mindset or communion in spiritual perspective. Just as he identifies the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas as a kindred spirit, Merton finds his own contemporary, Walker Percy, a genial and engaging spiritual companion in dialogue. I find focus for this year's bibliographic review of Mertonia within the monk's terse but cogent remarks about this novel *The Moviegoer* and the novelist's debut – and I will return later to retrieve the related role of Merton's appreciation of St Thomas for our measure of recent publications about him.

Merton of Gethsemani and Percy of Covington (Louisiana) were more than contemporaries (born in 1915 and 1916) who happened to study at Columbia University, to convert to Catholicism as adults, and to frequent movies in Manhattan cinemas during the late 1930s and early

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 204.

1940s. Percy's *The Moviegoer*² earned the highest praise from Thomas Merton. He wrote to Percy (who would visit the hermitage in 1967) and offered an enthusiastic interpretation of *The Moviegoer*, especially of the protagonist's awareness of his predicament: 'I think you started with the idea that Bolling would be a dope but he refused to be, and that is one of the best things about the book. Nice creative ambiguities in which the author and the character dialogue silently and wrestle for a kind of autonomy'. Merton went on to describe how he was 'stirred up by the book' and suggested that, '[I]t should be read by the monks for a lesson in humility'.³

In 1964 Merton first read Percy's novel, a work that received the 1961 National Book Award. Said Merton of *The Moviegoer*:

The reason the book is true is that you always stop at the point where more talk would have been false, untrue, confusing, irrelevant. It is not that what you say is true. It is neither true nor false, it points in the right direction, where there is something that has not been said and you know enough not to try to say it.⁴

A scene early in Percy's novel finds the anti-hero Binx Bolling walking through the lower French Quarter of New Orleans. He has just intimated that his addiction to movies correlates with an instinct for 'the search': 'The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life'. For Binx, the movies 'are onto the search, but they screw it up' and always end in despair.

Merton's discovery of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* resulted in a unique bond at a key moment in his mature years. It was during this same period that Merton initiated and sustained a correspondence with the Polish linguist, poet and literary critic Czeslaw Milosz, who both challenged and inspired Merton by proposing that he undertake a kind of theological literary criticism.⁵ Merton found that fiction writers like Percy reliably distilled our spiritual crisis, our despair and our anguish, through their literary art; he prescribed reading their work as a spiritual antidote to the poisons of our time

In *The Moviegoer*, Binx consults the polls (a particularly American pathology) and discovers early in the novel that 98% of Americans believe in God and 2% are atheists and agnostics—'which leaves not a

2. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Noonday, 1967).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 282.

4. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, pp. 281-82.

5. Thomas Merton, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (ed. Robert Faggen; New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1997), p. 142.

single percentage point for a [religious] seeker'.⁶ In the opening pages of the novel, Percy has launched a masterpiece of irony when he has Binx describe the contents of his olive drab strongbox:

[I]n [it] I placed my birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance, a few stock certificates, and my inheritance: a deed to ten acres of a defunct duck club down in St. Bernard's Parish... I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink.⁷

Few modern fiction writers rival Percy's skill at satire. This inventory of 'securities' echoes Thomas Merton's satiric plea, 'Can't we give them something more than air conditioning?'⁸ Walker Percy is likewise preoccupied with his characters' search for a deeper, authentic spiritual identity. The first morning in *The Moviegoer*, he has Binx dressing, only to halt as he gathers his belongings from the bureau: 'They looked both unfamiliar and at the same time full of clues... A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it. It was as invisible as his own hand. Once I saw it, however, the search became possible'. Percy delivers the supreme irony of the spiritual quest: 'To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair'.⁹

Merton's spirituality of the 'true self' fathoms the same mystery which Percy artfully unfolds in *The Moviegoer*. It is no wonder that the two were attracted to one another's work. The fact that the novel unfolds during the lengthy Mardi Gras celebrations in New Orleans and concludes on Ash Wednesday resonates with Merton's insistence that our true journey in life is interior,¹⁰ a life transformed in Christ's life, death, and resurrection. But the key to Percy's world lies in the epigraph to the novel, a quotation from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death*: 'the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of itself as despair'. Out of the throes of this existential realization both Merton and Percy summon the reader to claim the deepest transcendental freedom that characterizes the human person created in the image and likeness of God. Novelist and spiritual master know that such human freedom is fulfilled in deciding *who* we are – in defiance of the world's pressures

6. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 10.

7. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 4.

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image Books; New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 258.

9. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, pp. 8-10.

10. Thomas Percy, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 11.

and seductions that lead to massive conformity, the abdication of a person's transcendental freedom. Despair festers under the dominant consumer society's narcotic of advertising, with its empty promises. Unaware of herself in despair, the person abdicates transcendental freedom and a sense of authentic identity.

One of Merton's journal entries (18 January 1964) is even more direct. He carefully names the impact of Percy's genius in *The Moviegoer*, praising the novelist for saying 'in reality what the hero is not, his existential awareness of what he is not'. Merton interprets '[Binx's] sense of alienation [in terms of] his comparative refusal to be alienated as everybody else...his comparative acceptance of this ambiguity and failure'.¹¹ I am reminded of that very deliberate essay which Merton wrote in early 1968 for African-American writers in Louisville, entitled 'Alienation is for Everybody'. There he recommends that we come out from under our mask, because '[A]lienation begins when culture divides me against myself, puts a mask on me, gives me a role I may or may not want to play'. Merton's remedy was challenging us to awaken and be free from the grasp of self-alienation, what he called the 'perpetual mental Charley horse of self-conscious frustration'. He turns to artists like Percy who perform the exorcism for a reader's alienation. In Merton's metaphor, '[W]e need...to release the face that is sweating under the mask and let it sweat out in the open for a change' – a splendid post-*Mardi Gras* Lenten-Easter image!¹²

In a letter of 11 February 1964 to his mentor Mark Van Doren, Merton applauds Percy and points out how 'in the end it turns out that [Binx] is the only smart one, in a wild existentialist kind of way'. In this context he applauds the novelist and his protagonist for avoiding 'consoling religions'. And once again, the Kierkegaardian awareness of despair identifies the integrity of the true self – a self invested in the arduous rediscovery of transcendental freedom. Religious searchers refuse to ignore or to deny the real and threatening nature of despair in Merton's and Percy's appropriation of a Kierkegaardian universe; in such a context they warn us about a despair that is 'unaware of itself as despair'.

Already in 1959 Merton had written to Milosz about art dealing with our 'apparent despair':

If [the novelist] were not nearly in despair there would be something the matter with him: his plight is a sign that he is at least healthy enough to

11. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), pp. 15-16.

12. See 'Alienation is for Everybody', in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 381-84.

react... We should all feel near to despair in some sense because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours. Hope without any sensible or tangible evidence on which to rest. Hope in spite of the sickness that fills us. Hope married to a firm refusal to accept any palliatives or anything that cheats hope by pretending to relieve apparent despair.¹³

For Merton, the false self is the alienated self, unaware of its own despair; by contrast, the true self recognizes her predicament and awakens to respond to the threat of unacknowledged despair. Such is the despair that would otherwise neutralize or prove spiritually lethal to a person. In Merton's spirituality, this true self is actualized only in an act of transcendental freedom, responding to nothing except what he called the 'lure' of the divine; here is Merton's 'shy wild animal' — as he metaphorically rendered the true self in 'The Inner Experience'.¹⁴

As Merton is quick to point out, Percy wisely stops in *The Moviegoer* 'at the point where more talk would have been false'; rather, this doctor-turned-novelist 'points in the right direction' — in an almost Zen-like manner. For this reason, Merton called Percy 'one of the most hopeful existentialists I know of'. This very horizon of hope animates and buoys Binx's spiritual journey through precincts of despair.

Returning again to the novel's opening pages, Percy there shows Binx observing a newly married couple in the French Quarter. Anxious, threatened, already unhappy, the young husband spies movie-star William Holden. While he 'perks up for a second', Percy tells us that he despairingly 'contrast[s] Holden's resplendent reality with his own shadowy and precarious existence'. When he nonchalantly lights a match for Holden's cigarette, Percy teases us: 'The boy has done it! He has won title to his own existence, as plenary an existence now as Holden's' because he has interacted with the celebrity movie-star. The celebrity William Holden has patted the boy on the shoulder and moved along, 'an aura of heightened reality moves with him and all who fall within it feel it'. The boy manages to camouflage his recognition of the famous actor and to interact like a fellow 'man of the world', thus 'refusing to be stampeded like the ladies from Hatesburg'.¹⁵ Could there be a better portrait of despair and our culture's clamoring for superficial security? The seductions of fame, the sense of self constructed around a 'who do you know' mystique, the measuring of success in terms of

13. Merton, *Striving*, p. 52.

14. 'The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation (I)', *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983), pp. 3-15.

15. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 16.

people's wealth or title or power or prestige or disciples, all these collective illusions compromise our spiritual self.

From many possible Merton texts I select a rarely quoted introduction to the Japanese edition of *The New Man* (published in October 1967) to offer a Mertonian interpretation of this scene from Percy's novel. The monk makes a striking contrast. He observes the activist West which 'has lived under [the] sign of will, the love of power, action, and domination'. Merton contrasts this with what he calls '[an] essential aspect of Christianity: the interior, the silent, the contemplative'. He acknowledges that this aspect has 'long sought to liberate [persons] from imprisonment in a half real external existence'.¹⁶ Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* is tempted to satisfy his Aunt Emily's ambition that he become a physician. The future becomes a matter of 'duty' in this constricted Stoic universe. At the moment, he is a stock and bond broker and he admires Uncle Jules, a successful businessman. His secretaries are also his dates (or 'conquests'¹⁷ as he describes them). Binx nonetheless sees through his own emptiness. What Aunt Emily recognizes as his promising 'flair for research', Binx discredits. He recalls instead his being 'bewitched' the one summer he spent in research: '[F]or minutes at a stretch', he recalls, 'I sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight. I called Harry's attention to the presence but he shrugged it off... [H]e is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water'.¹⁸

When Merton applauded Percy as 'one of the most hopeful existentialists I know of', he made another observation. He supposed it was 'inevitable that an American existentialist should have a merry kind of nausea' and not be reproached for it. We might find in the monk's diction a pun on Sartre's work with this metaphor. I suggest something more complex operates here, something that a contemplative would alertly note. In Greek the word for ship is *naus*. When sailors sometimes got sick on rough seas, the illness was called *nausia*, which moved into Latin and then into English as *nausea*. Anything that is sickening or repulsive is said to be *nauseous*. A ship full of sailors moaning, groaning, and vomiting makes a distinct sound, and to describe that sound the French adapted the Latin 'nausea' into the word 'noise' with its harsh consonants (*la bruit*). In interpreting Merton's description of Percy's work as 'a merry kind of nausea', I suggest that this fuller sense of the

16. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 136.

17. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 5.

18. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 43.

word applies. Here is an excerpt from a March 1964 letter from Merton to Nicaraguan poet José Coronel Utrécho in which he celebrates the awakening of the poets:

All the rest are turning out absurd and lifeless pronouncements and empty slogans. But the poets have the humility to seek truth from the springs of life, which are first of all silent. They have the courage to disbelieve what is shouted with the greatest amount of noise from every loudspeaker, and it is this courage that is most of all necessary today. A courage not to rebel, for rebellion itself tends to substitute another and louder noise for the noise that already deafens everyone, but an independence, a personal and spiritual liberty which is above noise and outside it and which can unite men in a solidarity which noise and terror cannot penetrate. This is solidarity in Christ and in His Spirit, where the only liberty is found.¹⁹

Binx identifies the root of his predicament when he awakens to recognize the empty upper middle class lifestyle of Eddie Lovell and his wife, Nell. Says Binx, sarcastically: 'It comes over me: this is how one lives! My exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception'. Such exile is existential alienation. Gentilly ('genteel' and 'Gentile') is, in fact, the fabricated, illusory suburbia of 'Elysian Fields' where Binx dwells, as empty as T.S. Eliot's 'Hollow Men' or J. Alfred Prufrock or inhabitants of *The Waste Land*.

I find it fascinating to note a passage in Merton's *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* in which all these images converge. Merton speaks of contemplation in the context of the monk's 'abandon[ing] the world only in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depth'. He insists in this posthumously published book that the monastic life is not a 'subtle escape' from the incarnation and redemption, but 'a special way of following Christ, of sharing in his passion and resurrection and redemption of the world', a 'plung[ing] deep into the heart of the world'. And then we are riveted by a sentence that resonates perfectly with Walker Percy's fictional universe:

[T]he dimensions of prayer in solitude are those of man's ordinary anguish, his self-searching, his moments of nausea at his own vanity, falsity and capacity for betrayal. Far from establishing one in unassailable narcissistic security, the way of prayer brings us face to face with the sham and indignity of the false self... This 'self' is pure illusion, and ultimately he who lives for and by such an illusion must end either in disgust or in madness.²⁰

19. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 172.

20. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Studies, 1969), pp. 35-36.

By coincidence, Merton records his viewing Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* at a Louisville theater in September of 1959—ending a 19 year hiatus of moviegoing. It struck him as 'on the whole intolerably stupid— one long tissue of complete absurdities'. This sentence from the monk (written two years before Percy wrote *The Moviegoer* and five years before Merton read it) might easily have been voiced by Binx in *The Moviegoer*!

In *The Inner Experience*, Merton names the malaise (a favorite Percy word) of the modern world: we have lost our identity as true selves. He recommends that we discover the 'I' who can stand in the presence of God and be aware of God as a 'Thou'. The alternative is what Walker Percy portrays through the alienation imaginatively enacted in *The Moviegoer*. Merton describes such alienation: 'For when a person appears to know his own name, it is still no guarantee that he is aware of the name as representing a real person. On the contrary, it may be the name of a fictitious character occupied in very active self-impersonation in the world of business, of politics, of scholarship or of religion'.²¹

This reference to the 'real person' affords a bridge to return to St Thomas Aquinas and Merton's appreciation of the Angelic Doctor's 'true spirit'. Merton frequently remarks how commentators inflated and distorted St Thomas's teaching. This predicament was compounded over history: by the time we had commentators on the commentators we had veered far from St Thomas's original 'true spirit' and genius as a teacher. The appeals to St Thomas's *authority* eclipsed his original, more engaging *discovery* of Truth. Merton remarks that, *pace* the theological methods in twentieth-century Roman Catholic seminaries, St Thomas did not argue that an adversary's 'wrong opinions' was demolished by his own 'right answers'. 'Very often St. Thomas has better insight into the *videtur* (the 'it seems' opinion, which he does not fully accept) than the ones who themselves hold it', observes Merton. 'Very often, too, his answer is not a refutation but a placing in perspective, or a qualified acceptance, fitting the seemingly adverse opinion into the broader context of his own view'.²² In the same manner, Merton insisted upon an inclusive 'hidden wholeness'²³ in all reality.

Turning to the new books, essays and other publications about Merton during 2002, I follow Merton's wisdom by bearing in mind the distinc-

21. Lawrence S. Cunningham (ed.), *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 295-96.

22. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 206-207.

23. Thomas Merton, 'Hagia Sophia', in *idem, The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 363-71 (363).

tion he himself makes between (1) the 'true spirit' of a thinker, and (2) how the placement of someone on an 'official pedestal' undermines a thinker's teaching. This past year presented a wide spectrum of writing, some of which belongs to the envied 'true spirit' category; other examples unfortunately betray the essential Merton and prove how alien some can be to his 'true spirit' when they domesticate him as an 'authority' on an 'official pedestal'. The former return us to Merton's own words in a context of silence and respect; the latter remind us that Merton heralded Walker Percy for halting at 'the point where more talk would have been false, untrue, confusing, irrelevant' – taking us in the wrong direction.

Primary Works

*Survival or Prophecy?: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*²⁴ offers the only previously unpublished material from this year's Mertoniana. However, it is not Merton's letters (which had appeared in Vol. 3 of Merton's selected letters to Religious, *The School of Charity*²⁵) but the translated letters of Jean Leclercq that are new. This work proves helpful because it allows us to read both sides of the correspondence. *Survival or Prophecy?* presents 50 letters from Merton and 31 from Leclercq. There are gaps when correspondence wanes (1951–52 and 1961–62 on Merton's part; 1955–59 on Leclercq's part). With the exception of three lengthy 1950 letters from the Luxemburgian Benedictine, Merton writes lengthier letters and with a deferential tone during the first decade.

Early parts of this exchange remind me of a dialogue between an untenured junior faculty member and a veteran tenured professor. There is much attention to one another's writing and research. Merton indulges in a good bit of posturing in the early letters. He seems preoccupied with publication, even inquiring about possible notables to write introductions to his work. By the second decade of their correspondence he has matured in monastic self-understanding and the voice is that of a peer. In a 1964 letter, Leclercq candidly notes that 'vitality' in new monastic situations comes from everyone but the Cistercians. He asks whether Merton's Order will remain barren. In a 1965 letter the Benedictine offers a self-deprecating description of his (and Merton's) amateur contribution to monastic spirituality by asking if the new generation will be more historically and philosophically knowledgeable.

It is helpful to read the exchange of letters regarding Merton's desire

24. Ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002.

25. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990.

to leave the Cistercians for the Carthusians or a more solitary monastic life. Leclercq proved to be a great advocate of the hermit lifestyle and spoke openly in defense of Merton against his critics in Rome and in monastic circles. In retrospect, however, the decline in interest in the eremitic vocation renders much of this conversation moot. Having heard one abbot (who is *not* from the Abbey of Gethsemani) remark that Merton is virtually never quoted or alluded to in contemporary Cistercian General Chapters, I wonder if much of the renewal he and Leclercq advocated has been eclipsed or if it is simply hibernating.

In the mid-1970s, I taught a summer course on Merton at Fordham University. Also on the faculty that summer were Bernard Haring, the distinguished moral theologian, and Jean Leclercq. During a reception at eco-theologian Thomas Berry's Riverdale Center, Leclercq (knowing that I was teaching the Merton course) approached me and introduced himself, 'I am the man responsible for Thomas Merton's death—I invited him to go to Bangkok!' His face was all smiles and his animation during this and other conversations on campus gave me a hint of Merton's friendship with this unique Benedictine. Several years later, I was answering the doorbell at the faculty house on the campus of Bellarmine College. I opened the door to a rain-drenched, short man wearing a beret and lugging a briefcase and a suitcase larger than himself. Showing every tooth in his mouth with his smile, Leclercq announced, 'I need a hot bath and a corkscrew!' So I was especially happy to read about the evolution of Merton's invitation to Asia and the Bangkok conference in this correspondence.

Leclercq's interest in Islam and Africa in the context of travel and his participation in various conferences and visits to monasteries proves to be a major contribution to Merton's expanding his horizons. In 1965 the Benedictine even chastens Merton for an essay on racism and colonialism, bluntly calling it 'oversimplified'. While Merton confides his desire for a hermitage and the solitary life, their relationship was not so intimate that he would seek advice or express remorse in correspondence about his 1966 infatuation with a student nurse. On its own terms, however, *Survival or Prophecy?* gives new perspective to the important monastic identity of Thomas Merton.

Robert Inchausti is no stranger in Merton scholarly circles. His impressive 1998 study, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*,²⁶ boldly interprets the monk's biography and places it in the context of American intellectual history. He challenges some of the established conventions in Merton studies and deserves to be applauded for that courage and the

26. Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1998.

intellect he brings to his task. Although his previous book has been largely ignored and underappreciated, Inchausti's new anthology of carefully selected and arranged Merton excerpts, *Seeds*²⁷ proves less intimidating. The titles of the four parts of the volume address key themes in Merton's writing: (1) 'Real and False Selves'; (2) 'The World We Live In'; (3) 'Antidotes to Illusion'; and (4) 'Love in Action'.

Inchausti shows an impressive familiarity with the Merton canon in selecting these individual paragraphs that comprise the collection. The arrangement around themes and relevant topics makes this volume different from other anthologies of Merton's work. In fact, I prefer these paragraphs that invite contemplative musing to the denser essays and lengthy quotations from Merton's books. I will be more inclined to introduce readers to Merton through *Seeds* than other publications. The overall 'quiet' effect of this handsome paperback invites the reader to experience Merton's 'true spirit' without the intrusion of commentary. There is the added focus that comes from reading again familiar and less familiar paragraphs that build a momentum, gleaning gems from throughout the entire library of Merton's writings. This arrangement of materials proves highly effective. Inchausti's work is highly recommended and deserves to be on every Merton reader's shelf. *Seeds* strikes me as a chaste presentation of Merton by someone who desires to present the monk's teaching in the silence and solitude where a reader will encounter a 'true spirit'.

Kathleen Deignan achieves a similar effect with her pioneering anthology of Merton's writings on nature, *When the Tree Says Nothing*.²⁸ Her book was published early in 2003, but since the publisher sent an advance 'reading copy' in October of 2002, I include it in this year's bibliographic essay. The foreword by eco-theologian Thomas Berry adds stature to Deignan's attention to Merton's manifold nature writing. Berry alerts the reader that, 'An absence of the sense of the sacred is the basic flaw in many of our efforts at ecologically or environmentally adjusting our human presence to the natural world'. He recommends a deep psychic change in our attitude that finds 'fascination' in the industrial world and its deceptions – the purely utilitarian domination of nature. Deignan arranges her anthology of Merton's nature writings according to various topics including: the forest, seasons, firmament, creatures, and mountains. Her excerpts from a variety of Merton's work are usually brief paragraphs, a style similar to Inchausti's anthology. (Some are lengthier, especially the seven-page initial draft of 'Day of a Stranger'.)

27. Robert Inchausti (ed.), *Seeds* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).

28. Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003.

When the Tree Says Nothing reminds readers what a gifted descriptive writer Thomas Merton was. He brings the eye of his landscape artist father, Owen Merton, to the details that he records in passages that engage all the senses. These are cameos offered by an observant contemplative. Since many of these Merton passages come from the early 1960s and thereafter, when the hermitage was built, they offer an intimate experience of the monk in his beloved woods. He learns from creatures and from the elements. The reflections sometimes read like passages from Annie Dillard.

Throughout Deignan's anthology the sense of the sacred breathes in Merton's encounters with nature. Here is profound and simple spiritual meditation. Deignan unobtrusively invites the reader to encounter Merton's 'true spirit'. In our technologically dominated age it proves reinvigorating to read Merton's reflections upon a brilliant sunny winter's day getting into his own blood. 'Living so close to the cold, you feel the earth'. Living away from the earth, he says, 'We are absent from the Wedding Feast'. I take heart from another entry where he observes brush fires in the valley and remarks, 'Cold, quiet morning, watch ticks on the desk. Produce nothing'.

While I several times lost the sense of the focal part of nature in passages that celebrated trees, birds and mountains simultaneously, or missed a particular Merton paragraph that I would have liked included, Deignan gives us a valuable anthology that I will read many times. Merton's poems deserve to be represented in this anthology (and in every Merton anthology) because he paints such vivid impressions of encounters with nature in their stark and alluring images.

Secondary Works

In another vein, Brian J. Mahan's *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose: Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition*²⁹ echoes Merton's advice in the chapter, 'The General Dance', from *New Seeds of Contemplation*.³⁰ The monk there cautions us not to persist and misunderstand life's phenomena because they invariably result in sadness, absurdity and despair. Instead, he suggests we cast our overly self-conscious solemnity to the winds and 'forget ourselves on purpose' – and join in 'the general dance'. Mahan invites readers in his Preface to engage in the tension between 'the self perceived as morally responsible or spiritually advanced' and 'the self

29. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

30. New York: New Directions, 1961.

perceived as successful in the more banal, everyday sense of the word'.³¹ He keenly surmises that these mutually exclusive self-perceptions are incompatible. We either repress worldly ambition to cultivate and to protect a self image as moral persons; or, we give up on the project of a moral self and compete in the marketplace of worldly success.

Mahan is not above being 'cheeky' in protesting that Merton's invitation to the general dance inspires but also intimidates. He points out that the paradox (and oxymoron) of 'forgetting ourselves on purpose' is calculated for ultimate self-consciousness. Mahan, a professor at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, employs the metaphor of learning to dance to dramatize this predicament. More worrisome is the 'self-hateful' attitude he finds in Merton's notion of 'the annihilation of the self'. You will delight in discovering what he describes as Merton's 'equivalent of an apology and a retraction' vis-à-vis the problematic view of self-annihilation in God. Mahan's interpretation of Merton's 'general dance' gives voice to a refreshing and disarming twist on a text that has become petrified with its own solemnity by all too many commentators.

Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose grew out of a course entitled 'The Ethics of Ambition' that Mahan has taught for many years and in different contexts. He transposes Merton's paradox into two questions, including one that makes the book more than a 'spectator sport'. His probing spiritual question is, 'Ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for?' This book is thoroughly engaging. Mahan avoids the 'self-help' model and instead uses Socratic exercises that help the reader discover new insights about spiritual life. In a chapter entitled 'Ivan Ilyich, John Dean, and I' he turns the protagonist's question in Dostoevsky's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* into another self-scrutiny: 'What if my entire life, my entire conscious life, simply was not the real thing?' In other words, how does the premature death of Ilyich confront us with new insights? 'Why didn't Ilyich know what he really wanted and why don't we?'

A related exercise has us unmask the scripted illusions of others in a case study. Mahan then turns the tables and challenges readers to unmask our own illusions in detail. He names this process 'spiritual indirection' and the humility involved disarms and rewards. Using Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos*, Mahan connects a Mertonian spirituality with an important confederate. Here is a refreshing approach to spirituality that explores three familiar 'lies' or negative reactions that Mahan identifies in spiritual life. The author keeps the book from wandering

31. *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose*, p. xix.

into abstract and vague concepts. Weaving throughout this well-written volume is a goal called 'reawakening our epiphanies of recruitment'. While we are tempted (and deluded) to pursue superficial worldly success in its various categories, Mahan finds that people are unexpectedly reawakening to their higher vocation of compassion and idealism. And it is not a guilt-reaction but a deeply felt desire, genuine beatitudes that we can depend upon to disrupt what we thought we wanted.

In a final chapter, 'The Meritocracy Machine', Mahan challenges the working of academic institutions as symptomatic of a failed society that distorts the Christian narrative. He offers an intelligent and constructive alternative that averts self-righteous posturing and takes up the real distortions between faith and cultural scripts. In sum, Brian J. Mahan rewards us with a book that is both faithful to Merton's spiritual genius and engages the underlying dynamic with a fresh, critical perspective for the twenty-first century. I want all of my students, faculty colleagues, and administrators to read this delightful book to encounter Merton's 'true spirit' engagingly revisited.

Papers from the Third General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland are collected in *Thomas Merton: A Mind Awake in the Dark*.³² Most of these articles are brief and rehearse familiar insights or offer tentative probes of issues related to the conference theme grounded in the text *Day of a Stranger*.³³ Several are outstanding and merit attention. A.M. ('Donald') Allchin's presidential address, 'Merton and Traherne: The Two Thomases', begins with Merton's indebtedness to seventeenth-century classical Anglican writers. During his student days at Columbia University, the young Merton studied John Donne, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughn. However Allchin directs us to Lancelot Andrewes and Thomas Traherne as the greater influences on the mature monk. His attention to the recent discovery of numerous new Traherne texts points to the creative, coherent theological thinking of a writer whose 'childhood vision of a transfigured, unfallen world, the world of Eden' where 'the glory of eternity is seen shining through all the things of time' provides a new appreciation for the influence on Merton.

Lawrence S. Cunningham's keynote address at the conference, 'Thomas Merton and the Stranger', explores two questions concerning the text *Day of a Stranger*: Who is the Stranger in Merton's title? Stranger to what? His reflections on the monastic practice of hospitality to the

32. Ed. Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2002).

33. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gribbs M. Smith, 1981).

stranger ('welcomed as Christ') weighs both the monk's counter-cultural flight from the world with its 'prophetic edge' yoked to learning how to love the world with compassion. Relying especially on Merton's essay, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' and seven essays on Camus,³⁴ Cunningham analyzes the 'marginal' status of the monk as Merton matures in the dialectic of solitude and solidarity. This essay puts in fresh perspective the wrestling and resolution that emerged from the monk's sorting out of these issues during the 1950s.

Dominic Walker's 'Sharing our Faith Journey: For Merton There is no Stranger' applies James Fowler's six 'stages of faith development' to Merton so that readers might see their own journey more clearly and journey with others through the various stages. The theme of 'fellow pilgrims' emerges from this essay. David Scott's 'Mosaic: St. Praxed's' provides a careful analysis of Merton's translation of a poem by Raissa Maritain. The author's deft handling of primary sources is a model for Merton scholars. His interpretation of the poem yields a stunning insight about Merton's translation of the French word, *receullement*. Finally, Cristobal Serran-Pagan y Fuentes' 'Merton's Understanding of the Mystical Doctrine of St. John of the Cross' Dark Night of the Soul' offers a succinctly written and well-researched interpretation of this classic figure's influence upon Merton. This essay shows great promise and one looks forward to more extensive work from this talented scholar.

Natalie Smith's *Stand on your Own Feet: Finding a Contemplative Spirit in Everyday Life*³⁵ takes its title from a phrase in Merton's 10 December 1968 Bangkok address, 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', the paper he delivered only hours before his accidental death. She follows St Benedict's ancient Rule for living as a leader in the network of 'Anonymous Monks'. She is co-founder of the Lay Cistercians of South Florida. David Steindl-Rast describes her book in his Introduction as 'a nuts and bolts book' that deals with the basics of monastic life.

This well-written spiritual study examines familiar monastic themes that apply to everyone: prayer; falling in love; solitude; daily work; possessions; the will of God; resolving conflict peacefully, and grace. The endnotes of each of the brief 35 chapters give evidence of her reading and understanding of spiritual classics. However, to choose Merton's quotation to entitle the book is misleading because there are only a handful of Merton excerpts or references in this volume. Such misrepresentation veers close to exploitation of Merton. In another sense,

34. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 179-301.

35. Allen, TX: Thomas More, 2002.

Natalie Smith misses the mark. The context in which Merton used the phrase, 'stand on your own feet', was to describe the ordeal of the Dalai Lama and other Buddhists who had been exiled from Tibet; all the structures that had supported their monastic culture were dismantled and the only alternative was no longer to depend on fragile political and social support for an authentic (and autonomous) monastic life. Nowhere is there a significant analysis of the sociopolitical environs and implications of this phrase in Smith's book. Anonymous monks indeed practice something akin to an independent spiritual life. Merton went on to speak of monasticism as an instinct of the human heart, an imperishable reality. He even pressed the vested interests of contemporary monastic institutions and the institutional church. One would expect a title like *Stand on your Own Feet* to deliver equally pointed direction and critical reflection for the post-Christian reality of religious believers in the United States of America in the new millennium.

Robert Waldron's *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering his Poetry, Essays, and Journals*³⁶ is the third book on Merton that this author has published. In 1994 he wrote *Thomas Merton in Search of his Soul*; in 2000 he wrote *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton*. This latest offering comprises a 'reading journal' written in preparation for a retreat on Merton's poetry that he presented in September 2000. Waldron is a recently retired Boston high school English teacher. His love of literature is evident in these pages. The author attributes his method to a line from Robert Frost: paying attention to 'the beautiful, bare text'. While this plays out in his version of the French *explication de text*, Waldron later suggests that his goal is to achieve a mode of 'praying poetry'.

Walking with Thomas Merton mentions 12 of the monk's poems that the author prepared in planning for the retreat. However, there is little by way of analysis or explication in these 117 pages. While Waldron remembers and presents a multitude of his favorite Merton quotations in the course of this 'reading journal', they appear often in a stream of consciousness process. Unlike Inchausti's or Deignan's anthologies, this book does not reverence either Merton's poetry or prose excerpts in a way that leads us to the monk's 'true spirit'. At times the writer is too self-conscious or distracted. Those who enjoy the fluidity found in another's journal writing might appreciate this personal engagement with various Merton's texts. I encourage Waldron to organize his retreat notes and offer more direct and lucid interpretations of Merton's poetry because this is still a neglected domain of Merton studies.

36. Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002.

*Advent and Christmas with Thomas Merton*³⁷ is a 57-page text, one-third of which is devoted to brief quotations from the monk's writings. The editors have combined a daily Scripture reading, an excerpt from Merton addressing themes of the season, and a concluding prayer in a devotional style. The 28 days of Advent and the 12 days of Christmas structure the book. There is a spectrum of familiar Merton works represented in the quotations. Several of the earlier Merton texts are expressed in very traditional scholastic theology categories. It surprised me that there is no excerpt from Merton's mature Christmas meditation, 'The Time of the End is the Time of No Room', in *Raids on the Unspeakable*.³⁸ This compelling essay offers multiple Advent and Christmas meditations that represent Merton's most sublime reflections on the mystery of Christ as Emmanuel, God among us.

Work in Academic Journals

A 1956 event in Merton's life is the focus of Alexander Smith's welcome essay, 'Burnt Offerings to Prometheus: The Consultation Meetings Between Thomas Merton and Gregory Zilboorg'.³⁹ Omitted in last year's bibliographic essay, Smith offers a professional review as a psychotherapist of an incident at St John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. During the summer of 1956, a conference on psychiatry and religion was planned for the Benedictine Abbey. As a relatively new novice master, Merton participated for ostensibly educational reasons. It was a period of intense anxiety for Merton, who was more and more attracted to hermit life—and voicing a desire to leave the Cistercians and enter a more contemplative community (e.g. the Carthusians) where such a lifestyle might be encouraged. Abbot James Fox discouraged such intimations and sought the behind-the-scenes collaboration of Abbot Baldwin at St John's to precipitate Dr Gregory Zilboorg's psychoanalysis of Merton while the psychiatrist was a speaker at the conference. Michael Mott reported on this very scene almost 20 years ago in the official Merton biography.⁴⁰ Smith is the first psychotherapist to assess and publish his findings on the facts of Zilboorg's interaction with Merton; he renders a cautionary judgment on professional decorum in the case.

37. Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 2002.

38. New York: New Directions, 1966, pp. 65-75.

39. *The Psychotherapy Patient* 11.3-4 (2001), pp. 37-54.

40. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 290-99, 329.

'The heat was more than either man [Merton or Zilboorg] could bear', Smith surmises. '[B]oth were blinded by their illusions of the other. They ignored the warnings of Prometheus: that a state of emptiness precedes the fiery metamorphosis of Spirit, and that the idealization of another human is no substitute for the gradual recognition of the Divine truth within'. He concludes, 'In the end, both Merton and Zilboorg came away burnt by their own greatness'.⁴¹

It is important that Smith assesses that the professional event was 'an inappropriately formed consultation with Zilboorg'. He does not hesitate to use the words 'ambush', 'coercive' and 'humiliation' to describe the circumstances and devastating effect upon Merton. Readers will find a revelation in Smith's appraisal of 'Zilboorg's apparently exposing his own confusing countertransferences toward Merton', even seeking subsequent contact with Merton by correspondence and a visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani.⁴² Smith's attention to 'unconscious interactions' and 'understanding creative space in consultation with religious' has perhaps today an even more important bearing. Merton emerges as the greater victim in Smith's telling. He concludes by remarking how three such capable and 'established intellectuals...could not reflect their respective strengths and capabilities in these meetings'. Instead, 'three very large egos' were 'each caught in his own unconscious pull towards untransformed narcissism'.⁴³ A factor in the failed consultation (a word I trust that Smith is employing in a clinical and not a colloquial manner) is Zilboorg's status as a convert to Catholicism. It is vexing, however, that Smith makes no mention or analysis of the effect or role of Zilboorg's cancer diagnosis (as reported by Mott) shortly before these events. The effects on the distinguished psychiatrist's behavior warrants further attention as a factor in these 'consultations'.

Thomas Del Prete is no stranger to Merton scholarly circles. 'Being What We Are: Thomas Merton's Spirituality of Education'⁴⁴ builds upon his pioneering work over a decade ago, *Thomas Merton and the Education of the Whole Person*.⁴⁵ In this essay he revisits familiar Merton themes: (1) our personal identity is embedded dynamically in love in our own being; (2) discovering ourselves is a process of inner realization that leads us to be what we already are; (3) we are most fully ourselves when we

41. Smith, 'Burnt Offerings to Prometheus', p. 38.

42. Smith, 'Burnt Offerings to Prometheus', pp. 39-40.

43. Smith, 'Burnt Offerings to Prometheus', p. 53.

44. In John Miller and Yoshiharu Nakagawa (eds.), *Nurturing our Wholeness: Perspectives on Spirituality and Education* (Rutland, VT: Foundation for Educational Renewal, 2002), pp. 164-91.

45. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990.

live in awareness and response to a hidden relatedness; (4) the spirituality of the person illuminates 'what we are'; and (5) the spirituality of relatedness is the basis for understanding that, 'We are already one'.

The last two themes occupy Del Prete's special attention in this well-written and carefully nuanced analysis of Merton's contribution to a spirituality of education. I am reminded of the work of Parker Palmer when I read Del Prete—a high compliment, to be sure. This essay is particularly worthwhile in differentiating the contemplative way of knowing from diverse other ways of knowing. Del Prete contributes an important insight in his research and analysis when he points out that Merton did not set the contemplative over the scientific way of knowing. Nor did Merton discount science. The primary sources that Del Prete marshals in this synthesis of Merton-the-novice master's reflections, is well worth a reader's investment of time. Here is an essay of genuine intellectual interest, exploring Merton's appropriation of St Bernard of Clairvaux's wisdom as well as his appreciation of the quantum physics of Neils Bohr.

Karl A. Plank's 'Thomas Merton and the Ethical Edge of Contemplation'⁴⁶ takes up the paradox that Lawrence S. Cunningham addressed in his essay (see above, pp. 234-35). He identifies Merton's 'contemplative turn' as difficult for our culture's lens, causing us to distort our own view and be blinded to the contemplative's challenge. Like Cunningham, Plank sees Merton's contemplative identity playing a prophetic role in human society, not requiring that he abandon the world. A crucial 1940 passage from Merton's journals identifies the culture's desire to avoid pain, while disguising the contemplative need to look at the mystery of the self. Plank suggests that the overcoming of defensiveness is the ethical edge of contemplation. Contemplative self-knowledge takes away the defenses we erect and, at the same time, intensifies our experiences of insecurity and anguish as a human person. Few relate Merton's spirituality to a religious ethic. Plank's exploratory essay, therefore, is a welcome addition to new perspectives on the monk's spirituality.

Reference Work

The year 2002 saw the publication of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*,⁴⁷ co-authored by William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell. The underlying structure includes four types of articles: (1)

46. *Anglican Theological Review* 84.1 (2002), pp. 113-26.

47. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

Merton's books; (2) a selection of essential themes that emerge from these books; (3) the persons who were important in his life; and (4) the places where he lived out his life. The Introduction to this 556-page volume describes the encyclopedia genre as addressing informative reviews rather than critical reviews in the articles on Merton's many books.

I vividly recollect an encounter almost 15 years ago with Dr Herbert S. Waller, a rabbi and Jewish Adjunct Professor at Bellarmine, who remarked that he was reading Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He praised Merton as a writer but asked if there were not a tool that could help someone unfamiliar with Christian liturgy to comprehend the many liturgical terms Merton used in reference to life at the Abbey. I have often recalled that day's conversation, especially as I am now teaching a new generation of students, many of whom are unchurched; the baptized students are equally ignorant of liturgical culture and ecclesial life. As I picked up *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, I wondered if Jewish colleagues or students in the new millennium might find in these pages helpful to comprehend a now alien Christian culture.

The volume certainly collects a great deal of information. Its dense columns will reference more citations of Merton than any single volume I have yet encountered. It is a work of love and enormous patience. It offers points of reference, photographs, and quite a number of direct, objective articles on places and persons. How much do these help the average Merton reader, an audience that is apparently more intended than that of scholars? This encyclopedia is a bit forbidding for the intended audience because it lacks an index that would facilitate readers finding many otherwise hidden bits of information. This oversight is a very serious flaw.

The decision to devote lengthy articles (informative reviews rather than critical ones) to Merton's books deserve particular scrutiny. For one, the book could have been divided into four sections to assist a reader with identifying items in the four categories of articles. When the dust jacket tells us that the volume thoroughly covers 'all of Merton's published writings', I discovered that it means all Merton's published books, and not his numerous important essays published in journals and periodicals or other books edited by someone else. No small point. As a university theology professor, I fear that these tired and information-laden essays on Merton's book titles will become for students (and others) the *Cliffs Notes* for the monk's canon, sure to be plagiarized for many classroom assignments. Perhaps Merton would agree with Flannery O'Connor's reply to an NBC-TV journalist who once asked her,

after the first half of her short story 'The Life You Save May Be Your Own' was dramatized for viewers, to summarize the rest of the story. 'You can't summarize it', she exclaimed, 'You have to read the whole thing!'

Articles on various topics are intended to give a summary of Merton's writing directed to that particular concern. There is a critical judgment, however, in excluding material. For example, Merton's essays on 'The Church and the "Godless World"' and 'The Church and the Diaspora'⁴⁸ are not addressed under 'Vatican Council, The Second'. Yet surely they are some of the most sustained and pointed comments Merton made about the renewal and reform set in motion by the 1962-65 Council. The same, for example, might be said about the article on 'Poetry, Theory of'. Merton cut his literary teeth at Columbia University on the New Criticism. No mention of it, or of Mark Van Doren's influence. No cross references. This article is preoccupied with the two versions of Merton's essay on poetry and contemplation – a conundrum that shadowed (and distracted) him for over a decade. He eventually left it behind. Important insights into Merton's theory of poetry are to be found in his writings on Louis Zukofsky and Rainer Maria Rilke, among others. Not a word on them in this article. Along these lines, I looked for poet and Merton confidant Ron Seitz as a free-standing article. *Nada*.

Since I have prepared a lengthy review of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* elsewhere, I refer readers to that source⁴⁹ for further remarks. I return to the passage at the head of this bibliographic essay, where Merton comments on putting St. Thomas Aquinas on an official pedestal. The monk continues:

There is in St. Thomas more than the dry light of the classroom and the businesslike proving of theses. His understanding, which is clear as day, owes much also to the 'night spirit' which communes with what he did not know – witness his fondness for pseudo-Dionysius. He is not all talk, not a scholastic machine for grinding out answers. Though he was a prodigious teacher and writer, the force of his words comes from his silence and his respect in the presence of what could never be said.⁵⁰

Is the real understanding of Thomas Merton not poorly served by the very genre of an encyclopedia? By insisting that he be mainstreamed into the classroom? Imagine the satiric verse he would write about that fate, made possible now by his own encyclopedia.

48. Thomas Merton, *Redeeming the Time* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), pp. 7-92; 93-119.

49. *Horizons: Journal of the College Theology Society* (Forthcoming)

50. *Conjectures*, p. 207.

Finally, while it is Herculean for three Merton scholars to undertake such an enterprise, is it not also unfair to their audience? The two-volume *Encyclopedia of Monasticism*⁵¹ appeared three years ago. (I regularly refer Merton students to its pages because they are so relevant and useful in understanding monasticism West and East.) *The Encyclopedia of Monasticism* is the work of contributors from 25 countries. The scores of authors also contributed suggestions of other collaborators, proposed new entries, and commented constructively on editorial issues—all of which is gratefully acknowledged by the general editor. What better demonstration of the maturity of Merton scholarship, its international breadth than an editorial policy and contributions from dozens of scholars whose competence surpasses the scope of any trio of authors?

Related Works

James A. Ward's biography, *Ferrytale: The Career of W.H. 'Ping' Ferry*⁵² will be of interest to Merton readers because Ping Ferry played a supporting role in Merton's peace writings. In fact, theirs was a mutual admiration between two seemingly very different persons. Ward devotes a chapter in the biography to the relationship between 'the recluse and the worldly man'. He remarks on their intensity, the eternal optimism that bounded their worldviews, and a shared gregarious sense of humor—and the fact that both lacked closure on troubled relationships with fathers who died while they were teens. At publisher James Laughlin's coaxing, Merton began writing to Ferry in 1961. This was a time when Abbot James Fox of Gethsemani had embargoed publications directed to or from Merton. The monk employed Ferry as his well-connected distributor for underground typescripts of his censored writings on peace and related social issues.

The correspondence between Merton and Ferry focused upon the issue of nuclear warfare and the misuse of the 'just war' theory by many Christians, particularly by Catholics. They maintained an equally animated exchange over the crisis of racism in the United States. Ferry made several visits to the Abbey of Gethsemani; Merton eventually spent eight days with Ferry in and near Santa Barbara, California, en route to Asia in the autumn of 1968.

Ferry's career made for an unlikely compatriot of Merton. He began working in a public relations firm with Henry Ford II and J.D. Rockefeller. Ferry helped to establish the Ford Foundation. With Robert

51. Ed. William M. Johnston; Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000.

52. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Hutchins he set up The Fund for the Republic which became The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara. It was ultimately Ferry's opposition to the evils of unbridled technology, environmental pollution, racial inequality, educational deficiencies, and capital punishment combined with his philanthropic support of the Liberal Arts that prepared him for friendship with the hermit-monk. I once had the privilege of driving Ping Ferry to the Abbey of Gethsemani. He was a gentle soul and an engaging conversationalist. When he visited Merton's grave beside the abbey church, he stood silently for a long interval and wept. It was memorable because so few are as transparent about the depths of their friendship with Thomas Merton.

A book that initially appears tangential to Merton studies proves to be the most surprising and valuable contribution of 2002's Mertoniana. S.T. Georgiou's *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons with Robert Lax, Peacemaker, Sage*⁵³ disarms readers with its simplicity and directness. At first I was suspicious of this 30 year-old Californian's treks to Lax's island hermitage on Patmos in Greece and the interview format. This is the story of a seven-year friendship, a latter-day master and novice relationship. It unfolds in the most intimate and honest glimpse of Merton's Columbia University classmate, Bob Lax, that we have during this uncommon poet's final years. If you purchase one book cited in this bibliographic essay for its wisdom, this is the obvious choice.

Merton's attraction to Bob Lax as a contemplative who did not know how much of a contemplative he was cues us to what Steve Georgiou captures in this book, a page-turner of 284 pages. The minimalist poet and author of a splendid early collection, *Circus of the Sun*, serves a vivid sense of humor and an uncanny confidence in the incessant divine force that awakens human persons to a transcendent awareness and being. Georgiou captures mannerisms – such as Lax's rarely blinking, his greeting people on the island with a happy awe, and the rolling, meditative gait – that speak of habits of the heart.

The wisdom in these pages of dialogue resonates with Merton's own. Those who have read the exchange of letters between the monk and the expatriot poet (*A Catch of Anti-Letters*)⁵⁴ will delight in this encounter with the same Bob Lax. Here is an example of his mentoring:

53. Ottawa: Novalis, 2002.

54. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1978). These are expanded in *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax* (ed. Arthur W. Biddle; Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2001).

If you keep finding yourself in bad places, there's a reason why you're there. The time comes to figure out why, and in a calm, fluid way. That's why the best thing you can do in living is to welcome each moment as it comes along, because every moment has meaning. But don't freeze frame the moment—with understanding and appreciation let it pass! If you clutch at anything, the whole rhythm gets broken, and you can't grow. Just be patient, be gentle, especially with yourself. Every moment is a gift and so is the flow through which the moments go, so you let the moment come, you let the moments go. You just gotta let go to ride the flow.⁵⁵

No wonder Merton treasured Lax's friendship. Whether he talks about the generative and creative experience, or solitude, silence, writing at night with a flashlight, or light and the hues of color, Bob Lax communicates that what is most important in life is to 'live and *help live*'.⁵⁶

Georgiou deserves great credit for the conversation through which he engages Lax. The author is himself transparent and vulnerable in this chance meeting with the poet. He confesses that he had just ended a long-term relationship when he arrived the first time on Patmos, the island dominated by the ancient monastery and tradition of St John the Divine's cave, where the apostle wrote the Apocalypse. Georgiou's interrogations tap Lax's buoyant responses, which he describes as bristling with 'energy sparks'. The author asks about a journal quotation where the poet says that instead of saying something convincing we should say something true. Lax answers that there is no need for persuasion, only for the power of truth.

The Way of the Dreamcatcher is punctuated with many references to Merton's and Lax's relationship. There are also alluring references to Lax's Jewish identity before converting to Catholicism. He muses about the *kaballah* and the prophets. Of special interest to readers are Lax's ruminations about writing poetry (he emphasizes the forms of the Haiku and the sonnet, the sacredness of words, and art as a bridge-builder between peoples). Zen and compassion figure prominently in this dialogue. There is something wonderfully arresting when Lax reminds us that Jesus was not mistaken for a theologian but for the gardener, in his post-resurrection appearances.

The numerous color photographs that grace the book are handsomely reproduced and add a very personal dimension to Georgiou's and Lax's friendship. In the wake of first reading this volume, I know better Thomas Merton. *The Way of the Dreamcatcher* offers a crossroad where a reader will unfailingly encounter both Robert Lax and Thomas Merton's 'true being'.

55. Georgiou, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, p. 75.

56. Georgiou, *The Way of the Dreamcatcher*, p. 104.