A Vow of Conversation: Past, Present & Past-Present Thomas Merton Bibliographic Review 2007

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Introduction

Stephen Miller's *Conversation; A History of a Declining Art* draws our attention to a critical problem that, while noted by intellectuals, has gone unnoticed and unaddressed by the public:

> In the twentieth century the possibility of conversation has been questioned by many novelists and thinkers (from psychologists to postmodernists), who say that we are all solipsists and that what we say is shaped mainly by subconscious passions or by ideas that enter our psyche subliminally. "There is no such thing as conversation," the novelist and essayist Rebecca West argues. "It is an illusion. There are intersecting monologues, that is all."[1]

Concerned about this present state-of-affairs, Miller notes recent publications that lament the death of conversation by the murderous atmosphere of unrelenting contention. While each book, article and essay provides a different perspective on the situation, the general message is the same. We have become a society hell-bent on arguing. Everyone is seemingly angry about something or another. For reasons yet unclear, ranting and raving have become national pastimes promoted by networks and widely enjoyed by the general public as evidenced by Nielsen ratings. Perhaps the intensity that conflict provides has become necessary to sustain attention, that is to say, sufficient attention to offset the impulse to change channels, check messages, or move onto other convenient distractions. Whatever the reasons, quiet reflection on issues, thoughtful consideration of questions, and civil exchange of ideas have been replaced by mindless wrangling between individuals interested only in hearing themselves talk. All of this, Miller believes, has eventually led to "conversation avoidance mechanisms"[2] whereby artless soliloquies are free to proceed uninhibited by interruptions from others or, for the faint-hearted, when troublesome subjects are accidentally raised, potential conversations may be

graciously avoided. So prevalent is this behavior that few, if any, would doubt Miller's opinion that conversation is a dying art in American culture.

The loss of conversation is not without serious consequences. As forewarned by George Orwell in his novel *1984* and by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World*, the elimination of conversation inevitably erodes the human spirit. Neil Postman in his book entitled *Amusing Ourselves to Death; Public Discourse in an Age of Entertainment* has presented a persuasive argument to this effect.[3] For Postman, the demise of conversation in the West was more accurately forecasted by Huxley than Orwell. While Orwell had it right with regard to the Soviet Union, it was Huxley who understood that a dramatic change was taking place with regard to Western modes of public conversation. While no *Mein Kampf* or *Communist Manifesto* announced its coming, change in the way persons converse with one another none-the-less represents an ideology that imposes a particular way of life that is counter to the spiritual and intellectual well-being of those who seek freedom of heart and mind.[4] This totalitarian state is more difficult to discern and oppose than that which happened in Russia for it is seldom experienced as an imposition. On the contrary, it takes place not by the threat of pain but by "the infliction of pleasure."[5] This ideology is attractively marketed for citizens (perhaps more accurately identified as customers trained to produce and consume) seeking security, prosperity, and amusement. For this reason, Postman directs our attention to Huxley's *Brave New World* as a portent of things that have come.

> What Huxley teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; cultural death is a clear possibility.[6]

There was one, however, who situated himself outside the walls of our civilized world. Like Savage in *Brave New World,* Winston in *1984* or, we could add, Berenger in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros,* Merton resisted the workings of this prevailing ideology by refusing to become a one-dimensional man whose voice could be used to lull the public into a meaningless and pacifying spirituality. In protest, he chose to become a stranger in this world. Nonetheless, he kept in touch by publishing his crimes against the state. Interested in finding others of like mind and spirit who had also moved to the margins of society, he read Czeslaw Milosz's *The Captive Mind*.[7] While Milosz had focused his attention on the dangers of totalitarianism present in Communism, Merton found the book just as relevant with regard to life in America. With this in mind, he wrote to Milosz in September of 1959:

> If there is one ambition we should allow ourselves, and one form of strength, it is perhaps this kind of wholehearted irony, to *be* a complete piece of systematic irony in the middle of the totalitarian lie—or capitalist one. And even the official religious one.[8]

Merton sensed the emergence of the world of which Miller now writes and recognized the seriousness of the problem of which Postman warns. We need to look no further than *War and the Crisis of Language* to find evidence of this. Commenting on Gunnar Ekelof's *Sonata For Denatured Prose,* Merton wrote:

> It is an angry protest against contemporary, denatured language. Ironically, it declares that ordinary modes of communication have broken down into banality and deception. It suggests that violence has gradually come to take the place of other, more polite, communications. Where there is such a flood of words that all words are unsure, it becomes necessary to make one's meaning clear with blows; or at least one explores this as a valid possibility. The incoherence of language that cannot be trusted and the coherence of weapons that are infallible, or thought to be: this is the dialectic of politics and war, the prose of the twentieth century.[9]

Merton's interest in language extended beyond the problem of violence. It was a preoccupation that defined in many ways his vocation as a monk. While *Contemplation and Dialogue*[10] focuses on interfaith dialogue, Merton's inclusion of Marxism in the discus-

sion significantly extends the boundaries of this essay far beyond the borders of traditional religions. Furthermore, we are reminded of Merton's conversation with others like Albert Camus whom he referred to as the "Algerian Cenobite" or Lenny Bruce whom he called a "monk running in reverse." Merton's capacity for and interest in conversations knew no boundaries. Equally important, as *Contemplation and Dialogue* shows, he was of the opinion that the contemplative life was essential for meaningful dialogue providing as it does common ground for conversations that seek to transcend traditional boundaries and barriers by looking to new horizons. Merton, however, was aware that contemplation, like conversation, had become a lost art.

> Unfortunately, we must also admit that it can almost said to be a "lost art." And for this loss there is certainly in the world today a definite nostalgia, not unmixed with vague hopes for the recovery of this awareness. But the nostalgia and the desire do not of themselves suffice to make the nostalgic one a contemplative.[11]

Recognizing that the contemplative life was in danger of becoming a mere longing for a spirituality that pacifies rather than one that addresses the present state of affairs, Merton called for a reconnecting of monastic wisdom and public conversation in an effort to offset the destructive seeds of one-dimensional thinking that had given shape to modern technological society.[12] While *Contemplation and Dialogue* clarifies Merton's thoughts on the subject, his letters, journals and essays provide a record of his conversation with the world. This is especially true for the journal entitled *A Vow of Conversation*. Here we see the importance of the contemplative life for authentic conversation that is open and honest and thereby offers new possibilities for life to flourish. Naomi Burton Stone, after reading an early draft, referred to the manuscript as *Vow of Silence*.[13] On the one hand, this mistake reflects the modern world's disconnect between silence and conversation. To think of a hermit in conversation with the world is a contradiction too complicated for many to grasp. On the other hand, as Stone points out in her preface to the journal, "the hermit who stays in his abode and receives visitors is definitely in the tradition." The monastic vow of conversion of manners became for Merton a vow to re-establish the tradition of which Stone refers by restoring the relationship between silence and conversation. This he works out initially in the monastery and

later in the hermitage where he rediscovers his place within the world and from which he is able to engage in authentic conversation. It is here that he confronts the solipsism that Miller and others recognize as an obstacle to meaningful conversation.

> One thing the hermitage is making me see is that the universe is my home and I am nothing if not part of it. Destruction of the self that seems to stand outside the universe. Get free from the illusion of solipsism.[14]

While Stone rightly points out that Merton's life of silence has provided us with "a feast of ideas and insights into contemporary and non-contemporary thought and writings,"[15] there is, however, something of greater value to be found in his work. The feast of which Stone writes has become something of a moveable feast to which writers and readers continue to turn for conversations that open us to deeper dimensions of the human spirit; to what Merton elsewhere identifies as "infinite capaciousness" that resolves the fears that drive humankind to hide from one another behind alienating walls.[16] In this way, Merton provides the antidote for the virus solipsism that is destroying our ability to effectively communicate and thereby rediscover authentic human community in the twenty-first century. While recognized as a notable spiritual writer, his role as spiritual director is no less significant. His writings not only inform readers but transform "intersecting monologues" into conversations among those who pick up his books, read, and talk with others about what they have read. Merton clearly understood this as an essential aspect of his vocation as a monk in the Twentieth century as evidenced by his notes for a paper on monastic experience and East-West dialogue to be delivered in Calcutta on October of 1968.

> The point to be stressed is the importance of serious communication, and indeed of "communion," among contemplatives of different traditions, disciplines, and religions. This can contribute much to the development of man at this crucial point of his history. Indeed, we find ourselves in a crisis, a moment of crucial choice. We are in grave danger of losing a spiritual heritage that has been painfully accumulated by thousands of generations of saints and contemplatives. It is the peculiar office of the monk in the modern world to keep alive the contemplative experience and to keep the way open for modern

> technological man to recover the integrity of his own inner depths.[17]

This essay is an effort at discerning lines of conversation initiated by Merton; a conversation that presently engages the voices of writers, reviewers, and readers who are, in turn, engaged with one another in an allusive inquiry for which there will never be an end but only openings of those engaged. While I have organized the books published in 2007–2008 according to past, present, and past-present conversations, they all represent on-going conversations that proceed from a contemplative vision of the world into various aspects of postmodern life. While different in many ways, I sensed that the works selected for this bibliographic essay share something in common. What exactly that might be became clear to me while reading Luce Irigary's book entitled *Conversations*.[18] Lamenting the loss of conversation in the academy, Irigary recalls the model of dialogue offered by Plato, drawing our attention to the participants in the *Symposium* who threw themselves into their search of truth; a search that was never limited by logical reasoning but pressed the boundaries of personal experience in such a way that intellectual inquiry into sexual love was both "amorous and about love."[19] With this model in mind, Irigary advocates for scholarship that is essentially conversational in nature and design:

> Now truth results from who or what we are, from our experience(s), from our journey, among other things from our advancement in the recognition of the other as other and in our ability to exchange with such an other in mind. The quality of conversations, which are gathered in this book, could be assessed, not according to the degree of asepsis and disengagement, but according to the degree of attentive respect for the other. That is, according to the involvement of the persons who enter into dialogue in the exchange itself; instead of their neutralization for the benefit of a truth indifferent to the one and the other, a truth that they would attempt to reach in the name of a scientific asceticism beyond any personal involvement.[20]

What Irigary articulates here is evidenced in the books selected for this review, as well as, by those who reviewed the books whose voices now enter and extend conversations initiated by a monk who entered the silence of a monastic community and has been heard

from ever since. Here we find a conversation grounded in Merton's life experience and the life experiences of those who choose to read Merton and write books in response to what Merton has shared. Consequently, we not only find in these books an analysis of Merton's work but, perhaps more importantly, a response to his insights and questions that continue to expand a truth that is sought by and shared with others. Here in practice we see what Merton articulated in theory with regard to the nature of religious thought which he stressed did not move from question to answer but from question to question with each new question opening a larger field of vision.[21]

Past Conversations

The first two books to be considered in this essay offer an opportunity to listen-in on two conversations that contributed significantly to Merton's life and work. The voices of Ad Reinhardt and Latin American poets intersect and converge in the voice of a monk who was able to find in an artist from New York and poets from the Southern hemisphere fellow monks with whom he shared a lucid awareness of Life, resistance to the present state-of-affairs, and a communion of silence.[22]

Even though Michael Corris' *Ad Reinhardt* is a book about the artist and the references to Merton are, while significant, limited to a few pages, it deserves attention if for no other reason than Merton's designation of Reinhardt as "Dean of the Great Silence."[23] As one might guess, the title of "dean" reflects a playful exchange between the two. In a letter written late in 1963, Reinhardt asks Merton if monks get promoted inside monasteries the way everyone does outside, especially in the art world where, if one endures long enough, one becomes a dean? Merton responded:

> Yes, as one dean to another. I am frequently promoted as dean, usually by myself as I get little cooperation in this matter from others. However, it is true that with your encouragement and assistance I am already the dean of small abstract calligraphy.[24]

The letter continues with Merton asking Reinhardt's appraisal of a few of his small abstract calligraphies and advice on printing methods and getting "the great brush into a small bottle of India ink." There was, however, a serious side to this playful relation-

ship. As Roger Lipsey points out in *Angelic Mistakes; the Art of Thomas Merton*:

> The surface tone is humorous between two friends of long standing, but they were facing one another, and they knew it. Soon Merton stepped decisively toward the world of contemporary art—in his own way, by the light of spirituality—rather than away from it. "We have to be men of our time," he told the novices in 1964 in the course of a discussion of art. It was a hard-won conclusion, reaching past art into the fullness of his new perspective.[25]

As noted here, Reinhardt's influence on Merton is sufficiently significant to warrant serious attention. Lipsey sees Reinhardt as an agent of change in Merton's life whose gift of art supplies and advice on printing techniques were tokens of much more valuable offerings of friendship, letters, and conversation that opened the New York world of abstract art to Merton wherein he was able to discover a visual language that worked with his interest in zen and *via negativa*.[26] It becomes increasing clear that an understanding of Merton's art provides a new and alternative perspective on his spiritual formation and his writings on the contemplative experience. In order to fully appreciate this new perspective, a study of Reinhardt's life and work is essential. Merton was, as Lipsey points out, a "student of Reinhardt" as evidenced not only by Merton's "Reinhardt-like" style but in the way in which Reinhardt engaged Merton on the relationship between art and religion.[27]

So, as we now see, the title Merton bestowed on Reinhardt hints at something far more meaningful than mindless banter between friends. It indicates an important dimension of the relationship they shared. Merton recognized that Reinhardt understood something from his vantage point as a visual artist that he had not as yet fully clarified for himself; something that could be discovered in conversation with Reinhardt**.** While an avant-garde artist from New York and a hermit in Kentucky may at first glance appear to have little in common, in this case, appearances are deceptive. Reinhardt has been seen as a "black monk gliding in the corridors of an impregnable intellectual fortress"[28] and Merton could just as easily be seen as Beat poet and artist tramping across America hanging onto the side of box cars. Perhaps this should not surprise us when we remember that they were undergraduates together at Columbia and there formed a friendship that was shaped by a

vision of the world presented to them by their Alma Mater. Even though their lives could be transposed, artist/monk and monk/artist, they were two very different men with different experiences emerging from different vocations. What made the relationship possible was a mutual respect for one another's differences and a shared desire to discover a truth together.

In order to get at the truth that they sought and the conversation that they shared, we only need to focus on the painting Reinhardt sent to Merton. It was a miniature version of a five-foot square painting of a black cross on black canvas with varying shades of black distinguishing the cross from the background. Merton describes the painting in a letter to Reinhardt:

> It has the following noble feature, namely its refusal to have anything else around it. It thinks that only one thing is necessary and this is time, but this one thing is by no means apparent to one who will not take the trouble to look. It is a most religious, devout, and latreutic small painting.[29]

It is his journal entry on the 17th of November 1957, however, that reveals how Merton viewed the painting:

> Reinhardt finally sent his "small" painting. Almost invisible cross on a black background. As though immersed in darkness and trying to emerge from it. Seen in relation to my other object the picture is meaningless—a black square "without purpose"—You have to look hard to see the cross. One must turn away from everything else and concentrate on the picture as though peering through a window into the night. The picture demands this—or is meaningless for I presume that someone might be unmoved by any such demand. I should say a very "holy" picture—helps prayer—an "image" without features to accustom the mind at once to the night of prayer—and to help one set aside trivial and useless images that wander into prayer and spoil it.[30]

In his review of *Ad Reinhardt* for this volume of *The Merton Annual*, Lipsey describes Merton's response to the dark cruciform painting, its effect on Merton and its use for mediation:

> It was pure abstraction—yet Merton could "read" it with unerring good judgement as a shy work of sacred art. In his comments Merton was not drawing on a body of established

> criticism; there was scarcely any at the time. Yet even now, when Reinhardt is universally admired and the critical enterprise has looked long and hard at this work, Merton's comments—burning with sincerity, lucid, and felt—are among the most penetrating we shall have about the Black Paintings.

While the presence of this painting in the hermitage is a visible reminder of Reinhardt's influence on Merton, it also reflects Merton's influence on Reinhardt. Corris writes:

> Reinhardt's most private reflections on the 'black' paintings are indebted to Merton's writing on this discipline and to his lively correspondence with the artist. For Merton, contemplative practices are classed as 'beginnings', where the decisive moment is 'a sudden emptying of the soul in which images vanish, concepts and words are silent, and freedom and clarity suddenly open out within you until your whole being embraces wonder, the depth, the obviousness and yet the emptiness and unfathomable incomprehensibility of God'.[31]

Corris specifically focuses on Merton's reading of St. John of the Cross where "'dark contemplation' and 'the night of sense' does not necessarily signify a complete renunciation of sensation, but allows for another mode of being within a sensual life."[32] This connection between spiritual and sensual was a primary focus for the two men. As we will note later when considering Merton's interest in Latin American poets, Merton was particularly interested in the interconnection between these two dimensions of human experience for his own work and formation as a monk. This was no less true for Reinhardt. Throughout his friendship with Merton, Reinhardt found a valuable partner in conversation and a benchmark for the integration of spirituality into his art.[33]

Between Reinhardt's painting and Merton's looking, a conversation was taking place. And, I would say that this is a particularly useful way to think of the relationship. The painting is the place where the two, monk and artist, sit together. Even so, Corris believes that there is a place where they diverge:

> Yet the point of intersection of Merton's theological concerns and Reinhardt's aesthetic concerns is surely an uneasy place for the 'black' paintings to reside. While Reinhardt shared Merton's enthusiasm for these religious doctrines and precepts, the artist chose to consider them in terms of a matrix of social

> and ideological concerns. In Reinhardt's mind this may have blunted the wayward spirituality that Merton was prepared to project onto the 'black' paintings.[34]

Lipsey, in his review responds to Corris:

> Undoubtedly true, the context should be broad and varied. But the term "wayward" sets off an alarm. Why should the negative theology, the rigorous path of Meister Eckhart, the notion of kenosis, the acknowledgment of the need to empty oneself of nonsense in order to know the truth, be in any sense "wayward?" All of these things were points of reference for Reinhardt as for Merton; Reinhardt drew on them in the dry but compelling poetry of his critical writings. Reinhardt belongs to art, not the Abbey, and the art world must and will fight its battles in its own terms. But so much in Reinhardt's writings from the period of the Black Paintings connects directly or obliquely with Merton's concerns. Reinhardt's aesthetic, social, and ideological positions, brilliantly and painstakingly set before the reader by Corris, do not erase his perfectly evident concern to explore in the Black Paintings a visual correlative or embodiment of the *via negativa*.

An interest in the dark path of Merton's spiritual journey inevitably leads now from Merton's relationship with Reinhardt to the conversation presently emerging between Corris and Lipsey. As with Reinhard and Merton so also with Corris and Lipsey, it may be through the engagement of opposite opinions that a deeper understanding of the truth they are seeking together may be found.

Michael Corris, Professor of Fine Art at the Art and Design Research Center, Sheffield Hallam University in Great Britain, digs beneath the surface of Reinhardt's life to reveal the spiritual dimensions not only of Reinhardt's art but also of the artist himself who approached his art with the intention of practicing values grounded in a process that, like that of a monk, seeks to transcend the artist's ego as the final or absolute subject and thereby experience the immediate moment of self-awareness as an un-visualizable void. Corris offers us a unique biography and an invaluable study of an artist with whom Merton shared a long and enduring inquiry into the illuminating darkness of humankind's search for meaning.

Malgorzata Poks turns our attention from the art scene of New York to the poets of Latin America in her *Thomas Merton and Latin*

America: a Consonance of Voices.[35] Poks inquires into Merton's interest in poets from the Southern hemisphere, his translations of their poetry, and his personal contacts with Latin American intellectuals. She does so in such a way that we are able to see how this interest is an essential aspect of Merton's ongoing inquiry into humanity's struggle to live authentically in the technological age. As we shall see, Poks opens for us a conversation of great significance. Initiated by Merton, the conversation eventually included the voices of Jorge Carrera Andrade, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Ernesto Cardenal, Alfonso Cortes, Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Nicanor Parra, and Cesar Vallejo. And, then, of course, Poks' voice must now be added who extends and offers the conversation to us. As Patrick O'Connell notes in his review for this edition of *The Merton Annual*:

> It is a matter of some wonder, and a cause for much gratitude, that a young Central European scholar has explored in such breadth and depth these spiritual and cultural bonds uniting the Western hemisphere in the spirit and the writing of one monk-poet—at once a sign of Merton's own ability to transcend geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries, and a salutary reminder that voices on what might seem to be the margins can often provide central insights for those willing and able to attend to them.

Poks, quoting Robert Daggy at the outset in her *Preliminary Remarks*, underscores an essential characteristic of Merton's approach to these poets: "Merton did not, as he did in other areas of interest, write *about* Latin America but *to* and *for* Latin Americans."[36] This difference of approach is one of importance. Merton's intention was to open a conversation with poets whom he believed had something important to say, something he was greatly interested in hearing and something he believed the North needed to consider. For Merton, this hearing went much deeper than merely listening. It was an effort to enter into a relationship with these poets at the deepest possible level and there to create something new together. Consequently, one might add *with* to Daggy's *to* and *for* especially when we are reminded by Poks that:

> Merton firmly believed that the contemplative experience must inevitably lead to dialogue and that the fruits of contemplation are shared. His meditations on the literary works of others,

> therefore, resulted in the subsequent publication of numerous essays and highly praised translations, which, while remaining masterfully faithful to the original, reflect Merton's own lived and authentic experience as much as they do that of the authors. Merton's working definition of translation as "a new creation emerging from communion in the same silence" enables us to approach his English renditions of Ibero-American poetry as endowed with a life of its own, thanks to the translator's success in capturing what he calls a poem's "nativity or *natura*." It bears stressing that, according to this definition, a translation, no matter how faithful to the original, will always be "a new creation" in so far as the translator, a unique individual with a unique perspective, first has to enter into another person's experience so deeply as to make it his own ("connatural" with him), and then, reemerging from this "communion in silence," has to transliterate this experience in his own idiom. Far from detracting from faithfulness to the original poem, the newness Merton speaks of is a necessary condition if a translation is to be alive.[37]

The choice of *consonance* in the title and *resonance* throughout the book amplifies Merton's translations as far more than mere transliterations but a harmonizing of voices, his voice with the voices of the poets from the Southern continent and, in such a way, that they together echo "conversations carried over ages and across distances."[38] Perhaps more importantly, however, is the *voice* that they sought and found together.

> His wholehearted embrace of Latin America confirms the seriousness of his dedication to understand and help bring forth the destiny of the New World, which was bound up with that of the entire world: the eschatological new creation was becoming manifest in Indian America, and it was the voice of the New Man that Merton heard in the poetry, written and unwritten, of that continent. The new American proclaimed by Carrera and Andrade and welcomed by Merton was a total poet, a compassionate revolutionary whose colors were those of life and hope. Merton's poetic vision was a prophetic anticipation of humankind's new morning and a proclamation of a new world beyond geography. Passionate about the things of the earth and knowing their being as rooted in the metaphysical ground, the new Americans would help redeem the time from

> despair on the one hand, and shallow positivistic optimism on the other. Through them the hemisphere was becoming conscious of its vocation to redeem the world.[39]

The voice of the New Man was the "secret" and "the ultimate truth of life" that they, Merton and the Latin American poets, "saw flashing in poetic intuition and the unpredictable wisdom of dreams."[40] This reference to the New Man suggests that it would not be wrong to think that Poks situates Merton's translations within the context of his book entitled *The New Man*. The book was written and published in and around the same time, 50s and 60s, as his translations of the poetry from Latin America. The two projects seem to share a common concern. Both explore the question of human identity, the obstacles to discovering our true identity, the consequences of failing to do so, and the possibilities offered in the contemplative life of poets and monks. There is a significant difference, however, between this book and the translations. While the language of *The New Man* is what one might expect of a Christian monk, biblical and theological, the translations are part of Merton's effort to discover another language; a language that speaks to persons outside his tradition but is nonetheless true to his tradition. Merton's mixed feelings with regard to this book of meditations, however, suggests that he might have been aware that something was missing; that he had something else in mind that was not fully accomplished with *The New Man*.[41] Poks helps us to see in the translations that Merton is doing something more than sharing his thoughts on the question of humankind's identity and destiny. With the translations he is invoking the voice of the New Man; a voice emerging from the voices of compassionate rebel-poets intent on creating an inclusive world[42] of diverse yet mutual understanding, a world of true peace and prosperity, a world that[43] counters the technological society noted at the outset of this essay. *Thomas Merton and Latin America; a Consonance of Voices* offers us far more than a study of Merton's translations of Cuadra, Andrade and others. Poks shows that:

> Merton and his fellow "monks" affirm an alternative vision of life, based on the sophianic values of relatedness, compassion and solidarity. Renouncing hate, aggression, and other forms of violence, they revolt against the solipsistic consciousness that celebrates the unique self as the primary fact of existence. Their ethic of revolt consists in prophetically witnessing to a new reality, the seeds of which are already secretly present in

> the exhausted modern world, a reality that is based on truth and on resistance to the absurd.[44]

Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices ends with appendix entitled *Thomas Merton and the Poets of North America: A Consonance of Sorts* that turns our attention Northward. Why the shift in direction? First of all, Poks wants to draw our attention to the fact that Merton was not as alone as he might have thought with regard to his interest in Ibero-American verses. There were other North American artists, poets, and thinkers who shared the "realization that the dark masculinity of the West was ready for a healing reintegration" with the sensuality of the feminine that was so apparent in the poetry from the South.[45] There is another reason for the appendix. Poks wants to point out that there was a blind side to Merton's understanding of poetry in North America. After providing a brief history of a tradition in American poetry that shared much in common with the poetry from the South, Poks writes:

> But since Merton had not been reading much American poetry, he was ignorant of most of these new trends, let alone of their resonance with his own poetic development and with the anti-poetry of Nicanor Parra. It was only in 1966 that he finally came to regret the "impossible and sweeping statements" he had once made about the contemporary poetry of English America. As late as 1965 he still believed Robert Lowell to be a notable exception on the North American poetic desert. A year later, though, when the Latin American impulse started to lose its momentum, he was beginning to make surprising discoveries on his very doorstep. With characteristic enthusiasm, Merton started tapping these new sources of poetic vitality.[46]

Ross Labrie agreeing with Poks and finding this section of particular interest, responds:

> Even if Merton was right in feeling, finally, that T.S. Eliot's poetry, in spite of that poet's eloquent interest in religion, was overly rational and a trifle dry, nevertheless there were other American poets who should have attracted him in a more particular way than they did. William Carlos Williams, for example, had in the 1920s expressed the sort of reservations about Eliot that Merton registered in the 1960s. Poks might have been helpful here in distinguishing high modernism (Eliot and

> Pound) from low modernism, which included people like Williams. As a low modernist, as it were, Williams was experimental and yet not academically stuffy as Eliot and Pound were. With Williams' strong interest in the luminous innocence of the human and natural world and with his strong interest in social justice, he in many ways was a figure who would have grown in Merton's estimation even beyond the respect with which Merton held him in the late 1960s. The same might be said of e.e. cummings, another low modernist whose experimentalism with language, outrage at institutionalism, and Whitmanesque passion for a hidden and unrecognized America would have appealed to Merton.[47]

Poks recognizes that she has entered "unexplored territory" that required her to use "a wide angle lens and leave more detailed explorations of the topic to future research." Shifting metaphors, she describes her book as "a matter of opening a window, if not exactly a door, unto Thomas Merton's Latin American project."[48] Labrie's response indicates that Poks may very well have opened a door to the North as well as the South with regard to Merton's place as a poet. Beyond Merton's interest in poetry, Poks opens the door for a feast of conversations on related subjects. Merton's essays on Albert Camus would inevitably come to the table. Her references to the "rebel" resonate with Camus and the connections in Merton's thought between this French writer and Latin American poets; an intersection of inquiries that directions our attention to Merton's primary interest in discovering a way to re-integrate reason and wisdom.[49] The conversations would inevitably go East when Poks' passing references to Zen are noted.[50] Given my current reading of Merton's interest in yoga as a physical, mental and spiritual practice, I would inevitably draw our attention to the following lines:

> All the poets discussed in this book attempt to overcome what Merton defined as "the psychic and spiritual cramp" of modern man. They also struggle to liberate the sphere of the sensuous, believing that human libido, released from the repressive influence of the performance principle, would enable us to experience the world with our whole self again, the rational and the sensual alike, as prehistoric people used to do. This event would make modern man and woman a more integrated and more authentic human being. It bears stressing

> that Merton's first intuition of the importance of the sensuous to a holistic development of the human person came during his stay in Cuba. There Merton experienced Catholic spirituality as conducive to a more complete experience of life, through the sensuous joy attendant on the sacramental life, than was possible to achieve in the rational and abstract Protestant culture of English America.[51]

I have little doubt that the reference to Cuba as Merton's first intuition of the sensuous would occupy most of the evening's conversation as we traced his life experiences from France to India. If someone at this table had read Corris' book on Ad Reinhardt, he or she might say something about Merton and Reinhardt's interest in the relation between the sensual and the spiritual. Of more immediate interest, however, is the way in which Poks sheds light on the trajectories of this essay, reminding us as she does that in the new world imagined by Merton and these poets the:

> …irrational must be accepted as part of experiential reality, the Dionysian needs to be integrated with the Apollonian, and rational and empirical cognition needs to be integrated with the "heart of knowing" or *cardiognosis*, privileged by the "wisdom" approach to life and seeking to understand reality in the light of the ultimate causes.[52]

The new world that includes rather than excludes the heart is, as we earlier noted, the world imagined by Luce Iragary; a world that is explored in conversation where minds and hearts are openly shared and explored. To read Merton only with the mind, to respond to Merton only with the cutting edge of reason, is to misrepresent and misunderstand what it was that he had hoped to share with us. Merton scholarship, to be true to Merton, must strive toward the new world of which Poks writes; a world in which critical examination of Merton texts is a step towards, rather than away from, an intelligent reading of the heart.

Present Conversations

The following three books represent the new world sought by Merton and surveyed by Poks. Each author explores different territories and does so by entering into conversation with Merton. And, this may be just as Merton would have wanted it. William Shannon, in "The Future of Thomas Merton: A Progress Report," writes:

> In short, Merton is a person who, through his writings, enters into conversation with you. He tells about himself and you see not only yourself, but every person. He writes autobiography and *we* find biography – our own. He digs so deeply into raw humanity that his words will reach women and men for ages to come.[53]

The important word here is *but*. Without *but every person*, I would be concerned that reading Merton could become a narcissistic exercise. The line, when read in its entirety, suggests something very different. Merton invokes within his reader an awareness of the true Self that is radically inclusive; the Self that sees oneself in every person. Perhaps Poks has something like this in mind when she positions *participation* over against *solipsism* when noting this essential distinction in Merton's mind as he sought an alternative model of inquiry to that of the Enlightenment.[54] While it is true that Merton draws us away from the maddening crowd to discover ourselves at the deepest possible level in silence and solitude, it is equally true that he calls us into solidarity with every person and into full participation in the life of the world. Consequently, we would not be wrong to think of the next three books as invitations to participate in a conversation with Merton, the authors of the books and those who have reviewed the books. As we read each book, we come to realize that Smock's meditation on Merton's poetry becomes our meditation, Porter's personal reflections on Merton's biography becomes our autobiography and Palmer's book on Merton's intellectual and spiritual experience of paradox becomes our experience. How does this happen? Each writer leans into Merton, listening with heart and mind, inquiring with an imagination that transcends, without eliminating, reason. Read alone or with a group, these books require the full participation of the reader, drawing us out of ourselves and into a fuller experience of Life.

Frederick Smock's *Pax Intrantibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton* is, as the title indicates, a meditation on Merton's poetry. In the preface, Smock, poet-in-residence at Bellarmine University, identifies two characteristics of this meditation:

> There have been many studies published about Merton's life and work, but relatively few about his poetry. Merton shares a great deal with the ancient Chinese poet-monks, and, in their fashion, I have been tempted to write lengthy chapter titles,

> such as, "Sitting on Cold Mountain During a Spring Rain-shower and Hearing the Monastery Call to Prayers, I Think About Merton's Imagery of the Bell." In the end, I let the prose stand alone. Associative as it is. Intuitive as it is. One poet to another.[55]

It is associative and intuitive. Smock identifies with Merton as a poet and from there feels his way through the poetry until some insight or impression shows itself. Note, for example, how he begins a meditation with the story of a visit to Merton's hermitage on a rainy Saturday in March with a small group of retreatants and one brother:

> Meditating at his hearth, browsing his bookshelves, we found ourselves in imaginary society with Merton. The quality of our contemplation might have been relatively poor. Still, we were breathing the same air, and walking barefoot up and down in the same pine needles. We also read a number of his poems that speak to the notion of retreat itself. I remember with particular clarity a stanza from his poem "In Silence."[56]

After writing out the stanza from this poem for us to read, Smock slowly weaves the meaning of the poem into his own experience as a "secular writer [who] shares a great deal with a poet-monk – the desire for some kind of transcendental affirmation, and the discovery of the self."[57] He is not, however, unaware of those with him. On the contrary, he is fully aware of them, a small group of pilgrims of which he is one. Nor is Smock unaware of the reader. Here, as elsewhere in *Pax Intrantibus*, Smock draws everyone together into a shared moment of affirmation and discovery:

> When the woods began to grow dark, near time for vespers, we closed up the cabin and trekked back. We were not quite the same people who had come out that noon, nor was it quite the same world to which we returned. We were more capacious. "Art pushes out the boundaries of our universe a little bit," Salman Rushdie said to me in conversation one day. And that is something of what we felt – that our boundaries had been pushed out a little bit. And if the change within us was incomplete, at least our new capacity had prepared us for it.[58]

It is perhaps Smock's appreciation of silence that makes him particularly attentive, receptive, and insightful with regard to Merton's

poetry. He understands that it is the poet's job "to listen, so that things will speak through him." This book is in some ways an account of his listening to Merton and allowing Merton's poetry to speak through him and through him to us. Consequently, *Pax Intrantibus* is an invitation to us to listen. While in many ways Smock's personal meditation, it is none-the-less a meditation that seeks to engage us in a conversation. As noted by Kevin Griffith in his review for this volume of *The Merton Annual*:

> . . . [this] book is a meditation, not a critique. It is filled with insights to ponder. Merton's forays into Islam and his attempts to achieve a "radical ecumenism"; his disparagement of the materialism of the United States; his ceaseless humility as he became an important world figure – all are worthy of our consideration as we head into a century that looks to be marked by hardship, a century where superficial spirituality and mindless consumerism will not provide us with the answers that we need. *Pax Intrantibus* is the kind of book that tries to provide some answers we do need and, perhaps, are too afraid to confront.

That last line forewarns the reader that this book with such an inviting title is not for the fainthearted. Inevitably the meandering reflections that saunter through Merton's hermitage and poems stop us dead in our tracks with the harsh realities of our world, the world of Huxley and Postman, the world opposed by Merton, Reinhardt, and the poets from Latin America. Smock is no less aware of that world. The twelfth meditation begins:

> Denise Levertov, in her poem "Contraband," suggests that the "tree of knowledge was the tree of reason," but that it is "toxic in large quantities." Reason in excess, and the hubris that can come simply with knowing a lot, can become a tyranny of the mind, like a "dense cloud that harden[s] to steel." Or, as Gertrude Stein put it, in her 1959 essay *Reflections on the Atomic Bomb*, "Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense," (And this was before the Internet!).[59]

From here, Smock draws our attention to a poem by Merton. *Psalm* brings to our attention that while reason and knowledge can wall us off from God, imagination provides an alternative route not only to God but to peace on earth. Throughout the book, the au-

thor provides this alternative route into a far broader inquiry than one might have expected at the outset. This route extends beyond Merton's life and work. It is a route that eventually finds its way into our lives and raises questions about our work for peace in the twenty-first century. The poems and prayerful meditations in this book are hidden questions that emerge out of the silence, doubt and faith of two poets, one to another, and, now, to us.

J. S. Porter's *Thomas Merton at the Heart of Things* presents the reader with an interesting biography. By interesting I do not mean a new biography that provides information from unpublished journals, letters and/or interviews. By interesting I mean the way in which Porter approaches Merton. As Ross Labrie in his review for this volume of *The Merton Annual* writes:

> This isn't the book for those who like linear and analytical studies. It is more likely the sort of book for those who like personal and impressionistic accounts of writers who reach deep into the impressionist's psyche and won't let go. Dionysian rather than Apollonian if you like. On the one hand you are never quite sure, in spite of the table of contents, where you will be taken next. On the other hand there are fine moments of illumination as you journey through the book. The journey is Merton's in the first instance, but it is also Porter's as he retrospectively charts his own course from a family background in Ulster Protestantism to the universally human, spiritual consciousness that in Merton, the Roman Catholic monk, comes to engage him.

This somewhat unusual approach is not without justification. Porter bases his approach on the way Merton worked. Porter understands Merton's way of thinking as "relational, personal and experiential." He shows how Merton moves from one encounter to another, reading and reflecting, and, perhaps most importantly, forming friendships from which new questions and insights eventually surface.[60] And, this is what Porter does with Merton. It is also what he suggests the reader should do when reading Merton. When reading Merton, one is drawn into a *spiritual friendship*.[61] The Cistercian tradition understands friendship to be essential to the formation and health not only of the monk but the well-being of the monastic community.[62] *Thomas Merton at the Heart of Things* brings to our attention the need to take seriously this important aspect of Merton's work, i.e. his capacity for friendship and the ways in which friendship contributed to his life and work.[63] Porter rightly

believes that we should read Merton as a friend listens to a friend because this is the way Merton writes. Merton offers us more than words. In a chapter entitled *Tone Meister*, Porter writes:

> Tone has to do with how one sounds, whether angry or pompous or flippant. But it also has to do with where one stands when one speaks – whether one is above or below or beside the other. Middle to late Merton speaks friend to friend or brother to sister as if he were standing beside us, on ground neither more nor less elevated than the ground on which we stand. The power of his writing comes, in part, from his standing with us as he speaks, not as an authority or an expert but as a friend who is living through what we are living through as though his life were always co-temporaneous with ours.[64]

According to Porter, Merton writes *to* us. Or, since the correspondence is "co-temporaneous," we might say that Merton speaks *with* us. As Porter points out with regard to a journal entry:

> . . . since it is published, it comes to us as an overheard monologue to which we are privy. The monologue projects beyond itself, reaches for the other, and hence calls us into dialogue. The "you" of the passage is both Merton and ourselves. When one soul opens fully, all souls open a little.[65]

This dialogue, to which the reader is called, is, according to Porter, *incarnate speech*.[66] In other words, the conversation, while addressing spiritual concerns, is always and emphatically embodied in life experiences. Consequently, the opening of souls is the opening of biographies, i.e. the sharing of life stories. Inevitably this means an encounter with the most perplexing aspects of our lives. As Porter explains, when a reader comes to Merton, that person enters a world of ironies, ambivalences, and paradoxes and joins with Merton in his life and work of sorting out the tangled mess in which we presently find ourselves. With Merton, the reader searches the desert regions of the human heart and, with Merton, undergoes change and transformation.[67]

It is difficult not to question the classification of Porter's book as a biography. There is no question that just as Smock's book focuses on Merton's poetry, Porter focuses on Merton's life. The vantage point from which Porter focuses, however, is not that of a biographer. Porter is a poet and essayist whose perspective and interests are different than those of a biographer. He explores

the possibility of entering into a literary friendship with Merton and one that transforms the reader. As we have noted above, the transformation has something to do with opening ourselves, as Merton opened himself, to the deeper dimensions of the Self. Porter understands, however, that this opening is more than a personal transformation. It is an opening intended for the salvation of the world. It is a transformation that has everything to do with how the reader will see the world, live in that world, and address the issues of the day. Consequently, it inevitably addresses our inability to communicate effectively across cultures. That inability, as noted by Porter, is seen by Merton to be rooted in our inability to communicate with something deep within ourselves that we have come to view from a great distance as strange, alien and hostile. In order to embrace this side of ourselves, we are required to accept ambiguity, contradictions, and paradox as an essential aspect of human existence.

The reissuing of Parker Palmer's *The Promise of Paradox; a Celebration of Contradictions in the Christian Life*[68] provides an opportunity to reconsider an old conversation in a new day. With regard to this particular book, it is appropriate to refer to it as a conversation. Perhaps it would be closer to the truth to say that the book echoes a number of conversations, most notably the one between Henri Nouwen and Parker Palmer. The reissued edition begins with memories of that conversation. Nouwen had written an introduction for the original 1980 edition. The reissued edition contains that introduction and a new introduction by Palmer. The two introductions, set side by side, remind readers of the friendship and conversation that shaped the book before them. Palmer recalls their first encounter at a meeting called by the Lilly Endowment for consultation on spirituality held at the Algonquin Hotel in New York city:

> When I met Henri, he was already a well-known and much-loved writer. His classic *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1975) had touched me and many other readers. Henri was only seven years older than I, but to me, he seemed like a wise older brother, a virtuoso of the spiritual life with a genius for writing and teaching. He was also very funny, a requisite quality for any guru who hoped to win my trust.[69]

This friendship continued for the next twenty years until Nouwen's death in 1996. Nouwen remembers the many hours they enjoyed

together: eating, playing, talking, reading, writing and praying; activities that provided the basis for what he describes as "a supportive, nurturing and creative friendship."[70]

While working on his first book, *The Promise of Paradox*, Palmer asked Nouwen to write the introduction. He was somewhat apprehensive about the request since the book seemed to Palmer to have fallen together in a series of unanticipated and unplanned happenstances; in what he would later describe as "a moment of satori worthy of a Zen wannabe."[71] This may very well explain not only the content but style of this book. Nouwen, however, straightaway recognized what was at the heart of Palmer's work:

> This friendship has allowed me to see the pages of this book being born from Parker's own direct struggles with life and its many options and possibilities. Parker has shown me how true it is that you don't think your way into a new kind of living but live your way into a new kind of thinking. Every part of this book is a reflection of a new kind of living in which Parker and his family have engaged.[72]

Nouwen continues the introduction by pointing out that Palmer's life story contains all the elements which contribute to making a well-known scholar. He does so only to highlight that *The Promise of Paradox* is not the direct fruit of all of his academic and social accomplishments. "On the contrary," Nouwen explains, "it is the fruit of the many questions with which Parker bracketed these accomplishments. It is born out of the courageous and often agonizing critique of his own social, educational, and religious development."[73]

The reissued edition situates Palmer's effort at *living into a new way of thinking* in a new context. This time he seeks to engage a formidable opponent in conversation. Since the publication of *The Promise of Paradox* in 1980, much has changed. During the intervening years, the Religious Right emerged as a significant presence in American culture. In the new introduction, Palmer, after expressing some reservation about the republishing of this book, turns his attention to theological fascists whose dominance of radio and television airwaves obscures the meaning of words he once used without hesitation.

> My squeamishness [with the reissuing of *The Promise of* Paradox] has little to do with any fundamental change in my beliefs.

> I still understand myself as a Christian, and many traditional Christian understandings still shape my life. But in 2008, I find it hard to name my beliefs using traditional Christian language because that vocabulary has been taken hostage by theological terrorists and tortured beyond recognition. Of course, this is not the first time Christian rhetoric has been violated in public places.[74]

Recognizing that something serious has happened to the spiritual formation of religious life in America, Palmer, setting aside his reservation, sees the importance of *The Promise of Paradox* for readers today. By contextualizing the book in twenty-first century, he breathes new life into the book. An old conversation becomes a new conversation as relevant today as it was twenty-eight years ago. One might even say that the book was meant for today and has been on a kind of library hold until now. At a time in history marked by incredible change, diversity, and conflict, it is not difficult to understand the need for feelings of security that comes from the reassurance of unambiguous *truth*. Consequently, anyone who able to supply what is demanded, will find buyer. For this reason, the Religious Right has done well even though their product is seriously flawed. The flaw becomes most apparent when Life draws their most basic beliefs into the most puzzling of contradictions. Contradiction and paradoxes are problematic for persons seeking certainty and security. They are not, however, a problem for Palmer. As the title indicates, promise lies dormant in paradox.

It is no surprise that Palmer turns to Merton in the first chapter of the book. While reading Merton's *The Sign of Jonas*, he discovered a writer whose religious convictions, while sturdy, were "laced with wit and fresh images of the religious life." More importantly, here was a writer who embraced the contradictions of life and, in fact, understood "life as a whale of a paradox."[75] Palmer explores three contradictions in Merton's thought to see what might be discovered, not so much about Merton, but about the contradictions that we face today.[76] Of the many contradictions that could have been selected, Palmer focuses on Marxism, Taoism and the Cross to illustrate "how the tension among them open into a deeper truth."[77] For example, Palmer points out:

> By allowing Christianity and Marxism to create their own dialectic, Merton was able to develop a critical perspective on monastic life – a perspective premised on principles within the

> Christian tradition that Marxism helped Merton to reclaim. Such is the power of paradox: apparently alien points of view can remind us of the inner truth of our own![78]

What inner truth? While simple and in many ways obvious, it was an overlooked truth and one with serious consequences; consequences noted at the outset of this essay and earlier recognized by Huxley and more recently by Postman. Christianity, like Marxism, is against alienation. While Marx focused on the way in which capitalism alienates the worker from a meaningful life, Merton focused on the way in which the modern world of commerce alienates consumers from their hearts. Of course, alienation from one's heart extends beyond one's own well-being to the well-being of those who produce the goods that are purchased. Whether we begin with Marx or Jesus, Merton understood that we eventually come to the same conclusion, i.e. alienation is the problem.

Palmer recognizes that while Merton embraced the contradictions of our age, it was the paradox of the cross that provided Merton with the necessary perspective from which he could discern the promise hidden with contradictions:

> The cross is also a symbol of contradictions whose very structure suggests the oppositions of life. As its crossbar reaches left and right, the cross represents the way we are pulled between conflicting demands and obligations on life's "horizontal" plane. As its vertical member reaches up and down, the cross represents the way we are stretched in that dimension of life, pulled between heaven and earth. To walk the way of the cross is to be torn by opposition and contradiction, tension and conflict.[79]

As mentioned earlier, Palmer is less interested in telling us about Merton than in helping us get on with our own journey through life. So, eventually, he *gets to the point*, as we sometimes say, and writes:

> Thomas Merton understood that the way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives. The moments when we meet and reckon with contradiction are turning points where we either enter or evade the mystery of God…. We embark on the spiritual journey in hopes of achieving wholeness, but long before we get there, the journey only sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. The truth of the Spirit contradicts

> the lies we are living. The light of the Spirit contradicts our inner shadow-life. The unity of the Spirit contradicts our brokenness.[80]

Eventually, after adding his own voice to Merton's, Palmer brings us back to Merton and concludes:

> So in the manner of paradox, we come full circle. By living the contradictions, we will come to hope, and in hope will we be empowered to live life's contradictions. How do we break into this circle that goes round and round with no apparent point of entry? Someday, far out at sea, heading away from the place where God has called us, lost in contradiction, we will be swallowed by grace and find ourselves—with Jonah, with Merton, with all the saints—traveling toward our destiny in the belly of a paradox.[81]

Gray Matthews' review of *The Promise of Paradox* in this volume of *The Merton Annual* enters the conversation and concludes my thoughts on the book by drawing our attention to the reader's experience:

> I did not expect this to happen. Reading Palmer's book for review purposes led me to approach it in a slightly more detached way than I normally would have (as a kind of devotee, like any other contemplative sympathizer). I did not expect, however, to reflect on my own inner turmoil. I came to realize that I have been living lately with three unrecognized paradoxes that until now I had not understood as such, let alone articulated even as problems. The beauty of Palmer's book, is in its capacity to reveal that the problems of the human heart are not private concerns but are paradoxically, hence intimately, connected to the lives of others.

Past-Present Conversations

The next two books indicate ways in which Merton's conversations from the past have continued into the present. The first book accomplishes this by reissuing a work that was begun by Merton during his school days in England. The underlying concerns that set the initial project in motion apparently remained with him throughout the rest of his life until the 1960s when he returned to the manuscript, added a brilliant introduction, and published it

under the title of *Gandhi on Nonviolence*.[82] It is as timely now as it was when originally published. We find ourselves once again involved in wars that cause the death of innocent men, women and children. So again we look for an alternative solution to violence. This book is a clear and unambiguous reminder that there is one.

Merton selected and arranged quotations from Gandhi on nonviolence in five sections entitled: *Principles of Non-Violence, Non-Violence: True and False, The Spiritual Dimensions of Non-Violence, The Political Scope of Non-Violence,* and *The Purity of Non-Violence.* Each section begins with a brief yet insightful synopsis of what the reader will discover. For example:

SECTION ONE

Principles of Non-Violence

> *AHIMSA* (non-violence) is for Gandhi the basic law of our being. That is why it can be used as the most effective principle for social action, since it is in deep accord with the truth of man's nature and corresponds to his innate desire for peace, justice, order, freedom, and personal dignity. Since *himsa* (violence) degrades and corrupts man, to meet force with force and hatred with hatred only increases man's progressive degeneration. Non-violence, on the contrary, heals and restores man's nature, while giving him a means to restore social order and justice. *Ahimsa* is not a policy for the seizure of power. It is a way of transforming relationships so as to bring about peaceful transfer of power, effected freely and without compulsion by all concerned, because all have come to recognize it as right.

The quotations follow. Most notable are the spaces between the quotations. A typical page looks and reads like this:

> Non-violence is not a garment to be put on and off at will. Its seat is in the heart, and it must be an inseparable part of our very being. I-61
>
> The acquisition of the spirit of non-violence is a matter of long training in self-denial and appreciation of the hidden forces within ourselves. It changes one's outlook on life…. It is the greatest force because it is the highest expression of the soul. I-65

What are we to make of the space that follows each saying? In his preface to the new edition, Mark Kurlansky describes Merton's selection and arrangement as a catechism.

> Merton, the brilliant Catholic theologian and scholar of Eastern thought, seemed the perfect person to sort through the ninety volumes of Gandhi's writings, to analyze and interpret them. But instead he chose to create this brief anthology of one and two line observations. In its monk-like starkness it gives us an unusual insight into Gandhi's genius, and gift for consistently issuing short statements of such depth. Almost any of the quotes in this book makes a weighty epigraph. Merton did a Catholic thing; he took Gandhi's writings and cooked them down into a catechism, a clear, brief, and uncomplicated guide to the teachings of the Great Soul.[83]

Perhaps Kurlansky is correct, at least in part. Julie Adams, however, in her review of *Gandhi on Non-Violence* for this volume of *The Merton Annual*, read Merton's arrangement of quotations in a different light. Having recently read Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, she experienced her reading of the Gandhi quotes in much the same way. That is to say, she read the quotations as aphorisms from a guru, dispeller of darkness, that are to be memorized, ingested, and lived until at last the truth contained therein becomes one's own truth. Whether Merton had this in mind, is difficult to say at this time. Inquiry into Merton's arrangement of the quotations may reveal similarities with the form and function of sutras. We know that he was familiar with sutras. Furthermore, the practice associated with sutras is not unlike *lectio divina.* With both practices, reading is more than a process of gathering information. It is a process of formation. The reader is drawn into an interior conversation where the few lines are turned time again until at last the lesson is learned by heart and mind. And this is what Adams experienced and recognized as a new and valuable way of learning. Planning to enter the Peace Corp after graduating from college, she was aware that she needed something more than lessons on peacemaking. She needed something that would prepare her for the difficult work of peacemaking. She found it here. The spaces between the readings provided pauses where she was free to ponder the few lines shared by Merton from Gandhi until they became hers; opening and enriching her heart with ancient wisdom.

When Merton returned to the quotations in 1964, he added an introduction entitled *Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant.* The title invokes images of the biblical story of a shepherd and giant on a battlefield. In the center of the field stands the One-Eyed Giant:

> . . . bringing with him the characteristic split and blindness which were at once his strength, his torment, and his ruin. With his self-isolated and self-scrutinizing individual mind, Western man was master of concepts and abstractions. He was king of quantity and the driver of those forces over which quantitative knowledge gave him supremacy without understanding.[84]

Approaching the battlefield, we see the small figure of Gandhi, the Noble Soul. For battle, he carries only the ancient wisdom of sages from India, philosophers from Greece, and the Gospel from Nazareth. Unlike the One-Eyed Giant, the Mahatma seeks not to destroy his opponent but to save him. Merton's essay reveals the heart and soul of this man who lived a noble life in obedience to the principle of non-violence. In doing so, Merton also reveals the universal truth of non-violence therein stressing the necessity for practicing non-violence within the tension of world affairs, clarifying the ways in which the principles of non-violence inform cross-cultural and inter-faith dialogue, and the possibilities of non-violence for overcoming the destructive tendencies of modern thought with an alternative way of thinking that affirms and fosters life. While Merton focuses on Gandhi's understanding of non-violence, the essay tells us as much about Merton as it does about Gandhi. It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish one from the other on this issue. As the essay unfolds, Merton weaves the wisdom of Upanishads with that of the Shepherd of Hermes without sacrificing the integrity of either tradition. Gradually the reader becomes aware that Gandhi's principle of non-violence is truly universal.

Even so, we are fully aware that non-violence remains suspect. Gandhi's way, while admired, has found few disciples. Kurlansky addresses this unfortunate fact and, in doing so, provides a valuable insight into Gandhi's legacy.

> I amuse myself speculating what Sigmund Freud would have made of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had he gotten him on his couch. The two lives did overlap in time if not in geographic or intellectual space. Gandhi seems like a Freudian

> feast, starting with his life-long guilt over having been engaged in sex with his wife at the moment of his father's death. His life was a constant illustration of Freud's thesis that we cannot be happy because our inherent nature is contrary to the demands of our conscience or, as Freud put it, our ego is at war with our superego.[85]

Kurlansky moves from this provocative introduction to a description of Gandhi's engagement of the struggle between the ego and superego; an engagement to which Gandhi submitted himself by way of a simple diet, long fasts, celibacy, and adherence to the commandment to "Love thy neighbor as thyself." While Gandhi, like Freud, understood this to be an impossible undertaking, he nonetheless pressed on and not for his own salvation alone but for the salvation of India and the British. It is here that Gandhi's personal struggle takes on political and social significance. After carefully sketching out what could become notes for a stage production of a meeting between Freud and Gandhi, Kurlansky resolves the tension between the two:

> Freud believed that just as the human superego is a voice seeking to curb the unsocial urges of the ego, society has a superego that tries to curb its unsocial behavior. This societal superego, Freud maintained, came from "the impression left behind by the personalities of great leaders, people who were endowed with immense spiritual or intellectual power. . . ."[86]

The very next line in the text reads: "Mohandas K. Gandhi was such a person." In that one line, Kurlansky justifies the reissuing of *Gandhi on Non-Violence*. While the practice of non-violence will perhaps remain incomprehensible for many, Gandhi has left behind an impression on history that will remain a reminder of a truth hidden deep within the human conscience; a truth recognized by Merton while a school boy in England, returned to as a monk in Kentucky, and now shared with us in a book that will be read and re-read by many seeking an alternative way of living in the world.

The second book is fourth in a series of publications by Fons Vitae that provide readers an opportunity to benefit from papers and conversations at conferences that focus on interfaith dialogue. All of these publications have titles that begin with *Merton* thereby acknowledging the important role that he plays even now. *Merton and Buddhism; Wisdom, Emptiness and Everyday Mind* [87] like *Gan-*

dhi and Nonviolence is timely. Religious diversity has become the norm in the twenty-first century. Whether experienced online or next door, history now sets the difficult work of inter-religious dialogue before everyone. How we respond to this challenge will determine the future of human civilization. Failure to understand and sincerely appreciate the religious traditions of our neighbors will inevitably lead to the escalation of conflict, more human suffering, and further destruction of ancient cultures. Failure to meet this challenge will close the door on the new world imagined by Merton and the poets of Latin America; a world in which the voice of people everywhere is set free to resonate with the vast mystery that lies hidden deep within the human heart. Failure to find ways for religious traditions to engage in open and honest conversations may very well result in the victory of the One-Eyed Giant and the death of Wisdom. Those who gathered for a conference at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in Kentucky during the month of February in 2005, Buddhists and Christians, took on this challenge. And now, thanks to the work of Bonnie Bowman Thurston, we have the opportunity to read the papers presented at the conference and note the on-going nature of a conversation initiated by Merton. Several presenters at the conference remember Merton's *Mystics and Zen Masters* or *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* as their first encounter with Buddhism. Now, some forty odd years since the publication of those books, scholars gathered to assess Merton's knowledge of Theravada, Tibetan, and Zen Buddhism and the influence of Buddhism on his photography, art, and poetry.

If Merton were able to read the table of contents for this collection of articles, I imagine that it would be John Keenan's article that would catch his eye straight-away. *The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism* represents the kind of response to his work that Merton welcomed. As his correspondence indicates, he was open to the questions and criticism raised by others. While pleased to see that Keenan appreciated his contribution to Christian-Buddhist dialogue, Merton would most likely press onto the weightier parts of the paper to discover what was lacking in his understanding. And, of course, Keenan could very well have expected a letter from Merton; a letter that would continue the conversation. This "what if" yet believable scenario may help us clarify Merton's place within the history of Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

Pascaline Coff, summarizing Keenan's criticism of Merton, draws our attention to an obvious yet overlooked point regarding Merton and Buddhism in America.

> Keenan insists that "based as his works are on D. T. Suzuki's Zen teachings, we cannot look to Merton for any adequate understanding of Buddhism." For, as Keenan believes, Suzuki presented an "export Zen" tailored to the West without having Zen credentials or the weight of any Zen institution behind him. All so true. Suzuki influenced Merton, and Merton influenced many here in the West just as Buddhism was breaking into the West. Yet much has happened in the realms of teachers, writers, and translators in the Zen and Buddhist understanding and practice since then.[88]

The "since then" is important to note. Buddhism, like every tradition that finds itself relocated to North America, has gone through a process of rediscovering itself in a new culture. This relocation usually includes redefining essential beliefs and practices and, unfortunately, not always in ways that are true to the original tradition. Eastern traditions, like Zen and Yoga, entered the West through the underground, migrated into university courses and remained there until someone recognized that these practices could be sold at market in a popularized form. While this has resulted in the introduction of Eastern traditions to a Western audience, it has not done so without problems that rightly raise concern by persons like Keenan. This concern presses the issue of inter-religious dialogue at just the right place; the place where it is most vulnerable and in most need of attention. Keenan's brief description of this problem is, as they say, *right-on.*

> After forty years of conversation, people tire of dialogue, because it so often rehearses the same old ground about our common humanity, offering no new insight and no new approach. We bow to one another and cooperate on social issues. All well and good, but that does grow tedious…. All this goes without any delving into the actual teachings of these traditions, as if we had never trained ourselves to read scriptures and commentaries, to converse, argue, and enjoy the creative tension. All our creative trials and challenges are slipping into a numbing cup of soporific wine of dialogic oblivion. Perhaps

> so afraid of past sectarianism, this age of ours seems to have become enamored of a new type of unitarian sameness.[89]

I have no difficulty imagining Merton highlighting these lines. He would have been in full agreement. Merton was opposed to syncretism and indifferentism. For example, look at what he said in his essay on Gandhi:

> There have of course been spurious attempts to bring East and West together. One need not review all the infatuated theosophies of the nineteenth century. Nor need one bother to criticize the laughable syncretisms which have occupied the talents of publicists (more often Eastern than Western) in which Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, Tolstoy, Marx, Nietzsche, and anyone else you like join in the cosmic dance which turns out to be not Shiva's but just anybody's.[90]

His deep respect for Buddhism, or for that matter any religious tradition, including the non-religious tradition of Albert Camus, would not allow him to overlook the distinctive differences between traditions or attempt to blend them together into a colorless spirituality of universal consciousness and bliss. While he found himself in an age enamored with unitarian sameness, Merton was fully aware that this initial stage, where common ground was the primary concern, was giving way to a more serious consideration of the distinctive characteristics of each tradition. He welcomed this advanced stage of inquiry believing that within authentic inter-religious dialogue something hopeful would emerge.[91]

Merton's place within the history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue is not as a Buddhist scholar but as a Christian monk who approached Buddhism with wide open curiosity, intuition, and moments of wonder that enriched his contemplative vision of the world. One could say the same about the way Merton approached the Latin American Poets, Ad Reinhardt, or many others with whom he entered a conversation in search of…what? That is the question that needs to be asked. It is difficult to believe that Merton simply meandered from one subject to another without a question or two in the back of his mind; a cognitive interest, or matrix of interests, that guided his journeys to the far corners of the world. Was it a desire to reconnect science and wisdom? Or, was it to reconnect spirituality and sensuality? Whatever it was, it was always at play in the way he approached others. As we draw this essay to a

close, we turn our attention to the way in which Merton engaged and continues to engage generations of *friends* in a conversation grounded in a contemplative vision of the world.

Conclusion

Merton was and remains through his writings a hermit at the center of the city. As noted earlier by Stone, this places Merton in a well established tradition. He stands in the tradition of Clement of Alexandria. Confessing his love for and affinity with Clement, Merton's admiration is more than apparent from the numerous references to this Alexandrian as a great Christian whose mind was noble and broad and, while belonging to antiquity, ever new. Therefore it should be no surprise to find Merton looking to Clement as a source for renewal of monastic spirituality in the twentieth century and doing so for the very reasons pointed out in this essay, i.e. the reconnecting of monastic silence with public discourse, ancient wisdom with modern science, and contemplative vision with political realities.[92] His essay on Clement's *The Protreptikos* clearly articulates what he had found of great value in this early Christian theologian.

> The voice of Clement is the voice of one who fully penetrates the mystery of the *pascha Christi*, the Christian exodus from this world in and with the Risen Christ. He has the full triumphant sense of victory which is authentically and perfectly Christian: a victory over death, over sin, over the confusion and dissensions of this world, with its raging cruelty and its futile concerns. A victory which leads not to contempt of man and of the world, but on the contrary to a true, pure, serene love, filled with compassion, able to discover and to "save" for Christ all that is good and noble in man, in society, in philosophy and in humanistic culture. This is the greatness and genius of Clement, who was no Desert Father. He lived in the midst of Alexandria, moved amid its crowds, knew its intellectual elite, and loved them all in Christ.[93]

Clement was able to live within the city, presenting the Christian faith in terms comprehensible to the world in which he lived because, as Merton explains, he was:

> …a man of unlimited comprehension and compassion who did not fear to seek elements of truth wherever they could be

> found. For truth, he said, is one. And consequently its partial and incomplete expression is already something of the great unity we all desire. The full expression is found most perfectly in the Divine Logos, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ.[94]

In order to fully understand and appreciate Merton's life and work, his admiration for Clement of Alexandria must always be kept in mind. While a hermit behind the walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani in the hills of Kentucky, he faithfully maintained his vow of conversation. He had one truth to share. It was the same truth that Clement shared in his day in the streets of Alexandria. And, it is this one truth, sought, discovered, and lived in the silence and solitude of a Trappist community, that Merton shared with Ad Reinhardt, Latin American poets, and Buddhist monks. It is this one truth that continues to be shared when an old book on Gandhi is republished and a young student reads it for the first time. It is this one truth that writers like Frederick Smock, J.S. Porter, and Parker Palmer turn and turn again to catch a glimpse of the multifaceted "great unity" that is at the center of our being; what Merton identified at Fourth and Walnut as *le point vierge*:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely…. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.[95]

While Merton had no program for this seeing, he found in silence words that could awaken within readers what had been awakened within him. Robert Inchausti's *Echoing Silence; Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing*[96] provides a window through which to see how

Merton's worked with words to engage the world in a conversation with the Divine Logos. Inchausti's selection and arrangement of texts, brings to our attention, among other things, points relevant for this essay. For example, he explains that Merton became "a stylistic innovator who used language reflexively to construct a critique of itself" thereby exposing "the soulless tautologies of our systematically distorted, communication systems."[97] In the chapter entitled "The Christian Writer in the Modern World," we find a quote from *Camus and the Church*, one of seven essays by Merton on Camus, that underscores Merton's intentions with regard to his vow of conversation.

> Our task is not suddenly to burst out into the dazzle of utter unadulterated truth but laboriously to reshape an accurate and honest language that will permit communication between men on all social and intellectual levels, instead of multiplying a Babel of esoteric and technical tongues which isolate men in their specialties.[98]

The first word of this quote must not be passed over too quickly. The "our" is a reminder of Merton's expansion of his monastic community to include Camus and others to take on the difficult task of redeeming communication in the modern world that has become distorted, soulless, and destructive. To do this, he recognized the need to talk with persons outside his Christian tradition. So, as noted by Inchausti, Merton "translated the 'insider' speech of Catholic monasticism into the 'universal' language of personal and existential revelation" and thereby:

> … brought contemplation into the twentieth century, divesting it of its antique scholasticism and ancient prejudices: making it efficient far beyond the inner circle of Christian initiates. He retained the best that was thought and said within the monastic counter culture—preserving its traditions while broadening its appeal and bringing it into dialogue with the contemporary world.[99]

Convinced that communication in depth, across the lines that have historically divided religious traditions, is now not only possible but essential for the future of humankind,[100] Merton sought to awaken the world to the contemplative life of silence and solitude where words once again will have the power to reveal and restore the deepest dimensions of the mystery from which the story of

every person's life unfolds. When silence is echoing in the human heart, true words may be spoken and conversation will replace "intersecting monologues." Then, most honorable reader, we will discover that it is not as an author that Merton speaks to us, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only. He speaks to us in some way as our own true self, aware as he was of the One who lives and speaks in all of us.[101]

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