

for some psychological reason of his own, must cling to nature as always Edenic? I don't know. I do know that if one lives close to nature she doesn't have to "generate horror." It generally drags its mangled self across her landscape.

Whether nature is totally benign or manifests evil is not the point. The point is articulated by Fr. Conner in the Foreword: Merton's awareness deepened that "creation [was] a manifestation of God" (ix). Weis makes a convincing case that, for Merton, "What begins as attention to God's transcendence transforms into recognition of God's immanence" (103). She quotes Merton's friend, Anglican priest and scholar A. M. (Donald) Allchin, that God "com[es] to be with us where we are that we may come to be with him where he is" (97). The language may not be inclusive, but the message is clear. To destroy the natural world (in its beauty and brutality) is to destroy one of the "books" in which God writes large. To destroy the natural world is to destroy not only a gift from God, but, in some very direct way, a means of knowing the Giver. An "ecological conscience" is "essentially a peace-making conscience" (149). But it is also ever so much more.

Bonnie Thurston

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The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton is the first substantive book-length study of Merton's pervasive and prophetic consciousness of environmental degradation unfolding in his lifetime – a clairvoyant warning of what is coming to term in our own. For over a decade, Monica Weis has trained her well-honed literary scholarship on the emergent features of Merton's ecological concern, spelled out in a number of explorative essays originally brought to audience and readership in various Merton presentations and publications. In this volume, with a handful of interlacing metaphors, she seamlessly weaves together these several studies into an integrated work of creative originality and in a voice that speaks directly and personally to the reader. One such metaphor that opens Weis' exposition is "Dancing with the Raven" (1-8), her playful way of bowing to Merton's paradoxical nature. With an incantatory delineation of the features of this richly mythologized, shape-shifting bird, Weis summons Merton's totemic spirit to guide her in tracing his spiritual itinerary into the heart of creation.

The central metaphors which fasten her mosaic of Merton's ecological realization are those that iterate elements of "vision":

seeing, awakening, “spots of time,” sense of place, revelatory silence and solitude, and a recovery of a participation mystique with the community of creation. By means of these she brings us toward the panoramic sight that brought Merton to insight, while effectively tutoring us in the several social, historical and literary contexts of the modern environmental movement of which, in so many ways, Merton was both participant and exemplar.

In chapter 1, Weis rightly gives pride of place to Merton’s encounter with the mother of environmentalism, Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring* was critically influential in awakening Merton’s nascent ecological consciousness and conscience. In January 1963, shortly after the publication of Carson’s ground-shifting work, Merton wrote a letter of thanks, confession and anguish, signing on as witness to and collaborator in the global paradigm-shift her book announced concerning the way we perceive our place in the natural world. Weis aids us in a close reading of his letter – shown in facsimile – by setting it in the context of Merton’s other contemporaneous concerns: the rights of indigenous peoples, the danger of technology, atomic energy, nuclear war, and the Christian call to non-violence (9-21). But it is in his encounter with Carson – his ecological midwife and mentor – that Merton begins to see with her the core crisis of our techno-chemical civilization ever manifesting as portentous irresponsibility in the use of our titanic power against life, a form of pervasive insanity which Merton names boldly: *hatred of life itself*.¹ In this epistolary encounter with Carson, Merton discloses the depth of his passion and bewilderment regarding human disorientation in and destruction of the natural world. Though Weis notes Merton’s dramatic sense of human perversion, she does not explicitly probe its darkness or note where else it is reiterated in Merton’s ecologically sensitive writings, referring us rather to Merton’s later manifesto, “The Root of War Is Fear.”² This seminal essay, first published in *The Catholic Worker*, explores his growing perception of our mindless impulse to eradicate and exterminate what we oppose, destroying with it our own possibility of survival. Bombs and bugs meet as Weis returns us to his soul-searching encounter with Carson, where

1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 71; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 11-19.

he rehearses the potent mythologem of the Fall and original sin – surprising topics for a monk to engage with a scientist. Yet it is in these passages that he gets to the heart of the matter, and to the core problematic undergirding Weis' thesis: the catastrophic loss of cosmic vision and with it, paradisaal communion.

In his letter, Merton offers Carson his sense of humanity's difficult, delicate charge to learn balance in our state of being transcendent participants in the commune of creation, noting that to religious thinkers, "The whole world itself . . . has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a 'paradise' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them." Yet this is our vocation: "to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye in the body" (WF 71). But, he laments, we have lost our cosmic "sight" and blunder around "aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God" (WF 71). This is the crux of Weis' study: the dilemma of our ecological blindness and the spiritual challenge of becoming sighted once again. As she clearly demonstrates, Merton's encounter with Carson sharpened his moral sight and insight, particularly as she triggered his deepening sense of social justice to open toward an environmental horizon, what Weis calls "a revolution of love that expanded to include not just human beings but the entire planetary community" (21).

This initial chapter is foundational for Weis' study and she returns to it often throughout the book, since Merton's encounter with Carson was the catalyst that accelerated the expansion of his circles of care and concern, and the emergence of his ecological conscience. It is engagingly told in dialogue with many nature writers and environmentalists, who offer wide-angle and bi-focal insight into the psycho-cultural formations that obscure cosmic vision. I like Weis' habitual way of inviting them to underscore, in particular, Merton's "*ecopoesis*,"³ that deep longing for belonging to the family of creation sounding in his poetry and reflections on nature.⁴ Yet in this encounter with Carson and in other passages in Merton's writings not included in this volume, I hear sounding Merton's rich *theopoesis* as well, spelled in the alphabet of Genesis,

3. See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) 149; he offers a literary definition of *ecopoesis* as an imaginative reunification of the worlds of mind and nature.

4. See Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003).

where he professes his confounding sense of humanity's perverse disdain for life itself, and our need for redemption in the mystery of the incarnate Christ.⁵ Indeed, Merton's environmental vision is deeply Christian and Christic, informed by faith which is itself a sacred way of seeing. These more dense and difficult theological dimensions of his ecological wisdom are not directly explored by Weis, however, who remains faithful to her location and discipline as literary scholar, and to good effect. Her gift of bringing to light the developmental awakening of Merton's environmental consciousness is its own story that she narrates with exceptional richness and grace. At chapter's end we smile wryly with her that the paradoxical "dancing raven" began to recover his environmental vision not simply in sight of the leaves of a tree, but by insight written on the leaves of a book (the tree's noetic apotheosis?) – an intellectual revelation and revolution consonant with his deeply literary temperament. Thanks to Carson, scales fell from his eyes, which had obscured a more comprehensive perception of the root of human blindness and his environmental vision – his "cosmic sight" – became more clear. Thanks to Weis we finally understand the centrality of this encounter.

In chapter 2, Weis takes up a thoughtful examination of Merton's process of "Learning to See; Becoming Awake." Composing a holistic framework for what is essentially a rich evocation of his early eco-biography, she gathers material from spiritual and literary traditions – mystics, spiritual masters and nature writers – to introduce Merton's memoir of and curriculum for learning to see, tracing his evolving vision funded by a radical desire to awaken: "the urgency of seeing, fully aware . . . first of all alive and awake" (26).⁶ Keeping the forum open to a host of voices that offer rich commentary on her story of Merton's ecological illumination, Weis brings us on visitation to the persons and places that initially awakened his precocious visionary capacity to behold the natural world contemplatively. Most interesting to me in this chapter is Weis' strategy for building her narration of Merton's awakening. The chapter brings us only to 1949, during the early part of Merton's life at Gethsemani. Yet she and her circle of favorite na-

5. See Kathleen Deignan, CND, "'Love for the Paradise Mystery': Thomas Merton, Contemplative Ecologist," *CrossCurrents* 58.4 (December 2008) 545-69.

6. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals*, vol. 4: 1960-1963, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 123; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.

ture writers offer such detail and depth of insight concerning the abiding influence of sense on soul, that one is grateful for a story prepared at an attentive simmer, meaning to be savored – Weis' own contemplative style.

In particular, this chapter is made more vivid by Weis' own personal recollections of visiting Merton's formative places remembered as *light, river, rain*. Her skillful story-telling lets us see how Merton's impressionistic memories of early childhood in an artistic family encompassed by the landscape of southern France, will bleed through his adult concerns for rain, creek and elements.⁷ Likewise, she brilliantly attunes us to hear the echo of his childhood nature litanies – *kingfisher, chickadee, oriole, goldfinch* (32) – in his mature fascination with birds. With deftness of style made easy by her comprehensive familiarity with the Merton canon, she traces with sensitivity and economy the lasting aesthetic influences on Merton's sensorium of Prades, Rome, New York, and even Olean. But it is ultimately in Kentucky that Merton's naturalist's eye began to open and something of his Franciscan soul began to emerge,⁸ prompting Merton to proclaim the centrality of landscape and the necessity of nature for his contemplative existence.

The dénouement of this chapter (44-47) has us linger with Merton at a crucial but under-reported turning point in his progressive environmental conversion. As March 18, 1958 marks his social epiphany on Fourth and Walnut, so June 27, 1949 dates its ecological analogue beyond the cloister walls, in the woods and knobs around Gethsemani, noted at length in the journal entry for that day in *Entering the Silence*.⁹ A simple permission to pray outdoors becomes a spiritual liberation that ushers Merton toward the vicinity of paradise, as he is awakened more profoundly to the power and beauty of place, to the sacramentality of the natural world, which now becomes for him the temple of divine encounter. This day announces the promise of many others to be spent in his own woodland hermitage, St. Mary of Carmel, where his deep longing for belonging would be graced with an uninterrupted sense of

7. See the essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros" in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeaking* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23; subsequent references will be cited as "RU" parenthetically in the text.

8. See "The Forest Is My Bride," the Introduction to *When the Trees Say Nothing* (26-29).

9. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 328-31; subsequent references will be cited as "ES" parenthetically in the text.

homecoming: “*This is my resting place forever*” (TTW 79).

In chapter 3, Weis borrows a rubric from William Wordsworth (*The Prelude* [1850], 12.208) to accumulate flashbacks of Merton’s moments of awakening: “spots of time” (49). She argues that these revelatory flashes of intuition quickened the growth of his poetic mind, igniting liminal and luminous awakenings to the natural world. In a delicate layering of Merton’s reflections and her own, Weis again creates a dramatic frame for yet two more significant “spots of time” that open in 1950, which give further depth to Merton’s environmental vision. The first of these occurs in a torrential winter rain on New Year’s Day (52-53) during another of Merton’s epiphanic nature walks in which his inner and outer landscapes merge, and nature itself becomes his deepest “*lectio divina*,” a living scripture parabling God’s encompassing presence to him uniquely, personally, explicitly. The second happens six weeks later on February 10 (53-55) while at prayer in one of his early makeshift hermitages. Where landscape and wood were angels of annunciation in the January storm, February’s quiet revelation comes with the sight of a hawk diving for prey among starlings, a visceral *koan* that suddenly awakens the nature mystic. This tutorial by an avian master of contemplation teaches Merton the necessity of paying attention in order to be in communion with what the eye sees. “Practice. Practice. Practice” (55), Weis exhorts, voicing the mandate sounding in Merton’s soul.

This chapter continues to offer its richness in recalling another “spot of time” recorded a decade later, June 5, 1960, on the Feast of Pentecost (55-58) – by now a classic pericope in the Merton canon. Again preparing the ground for us to hear afresh “the first chirps of the waking birds” (TTW 7), Weis offers a layered context in which to stand with Merton, the observant and audient attendant of these heralds of dawn, whose songs echo the primordial question he – we – must learn daily to intone: is it “time to be” once again? (TTW 7). As she calls our attention to the ways outer and inner landscapes may align, Weis poetically sounds Merton’s sense of paradisaical allurements radiating from within the heart of everything, and his wonder in response. What he learned in his progressive opening to creation, so he taught. Contemplative life is this: to be fully awake and aware of divinity indwelling in everything, secretly whispering its true name: *Mercy*.¹⁰

10. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 362; subsequent references will be cited as “SJ” parenthetically in the text.

Merton's brief tenure as forest hermit deepens his environmental vision as we learn more explicitly from Weis' penetrating reading of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, his personal vision of the world of the 1960s, and reportage of his own soul-life in it. Her astute understanding of the intention and voice of each Merton verse cited, lends particular resonance to "The Night Spirit and The Dawn Air," where we hear an allusion to "*le point vierge*."¹¹ This is Merton's borrowed phrase that for him names an ultimate and unnamable "spot of time" perceived as the simultaneous heart and horizon of all being. Weis' masterful explication of the phrase opens a "surplus of meaning" to hold us attentive to this virginal point of multivalent mystery, and is one of the richest renderings of this ineluctable term I have found throughout Merton commentary (58-63). Weis has a keen eye for cutting through thematic repetitions in Merton's writing made during various editorial revisions; likewise her textual familiarity allows her to closely follow his at times circuitous literary meanderings. Adroitly she draws our focus to the way he "nests" the telling of his celebrated Fourth and Walnut conversion within the incandescent cradle of "*le point vierge*" whose radiance perceived in an earlier "spot of time" in the natural world, is reflected days later in the sun-shine features of his Louisville neighbors, who radiate an inextinguishable luminosity ever glowing from the ground of Love (CGB 140-42).

Weis brings this chapter to a close by reading *Day of a Stranger* with us, Merton's masterpiece in miniature (63-65). His poetic description of a single hermitage day for a journalist friend brings with it a confession: this eremitic life in the woods is an existential necessity if he is to create "an ecological balance" of all outer and inner worlds that are his multi-faceted earthly environment.¹² In his gorgeous essay we are returned to the songs of waking birds sounding again their dawn summons; and like astronauts coming around the bright side of the moon one more time, we are offered by Merton another pass at "*le point vierge*." On this day of a stranger, it affords just enough light for him to show us the whole universe unfolding divinity, and divinity enfolding the universe. In such merciful light, all shadow and disguise is irradiated and Merton

11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 117; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

12. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 33; subsequent references will be cited as "DS" parenthetically in the text.

recovers “cosmic sight.” There is nothing left but to join “The General Dance,” this final “spot of time” that closes *New Seeds of Contemplation* where Merton rehearses our Edenic vocation to be, once more, the gardeners of paradise.¹³

Weis’ next chapter deals with “ordinary time” and how Merton was able to recognize the Holy within it, entrained by a monastic *horarium* and nourished on the Psalms – biblical psalms sung in choir, originally penned in silence, and those read in solitude composed by mentors and mystics who were his confraternity of spiritual naturalists. And not only these great souls enriched the ordinary time of his contemplative practice, but the “huge chorus of living beings” (SJ 360) also became his choir mates as he learned from them all how to be “Dancing in the Water of Life.” In this fifth journal¹⁴ we hear how nature saturates his awareness, not in dramatic cascade, but like dew distilling within his senses and perception. As Weis notes, there are 225 separate entries about nature in this journal alone, and 1800 in the entire journal corpus. Under her rubric, “The Poetic Eye” (72-77), we see Merton exercise his “Edenic office” of bringing to language the beauty and mystery of creation among his hundreds of poems. Weis’ own poet’s eye likewise retrieves “found poems” hidden in his prose – nature *haiku* and other celebratory verse. Surprisingly, it is under this rubric that she recalls Czeslaw Milosz’s challenge to what he sensed as Merton’s naïve rapture with creation, a certain denial or refusal of its brutality and violence.¹⁵ Merton’s response is deflecting, absolving creatures of any blame while shifting it rather to himself and humankind, a refrain of the disdain that murmurs through his work. Here again, my theologian’s eye is drawn to this resentful misanthropy that can bleed through his prose, as seen earlier in his letter to Rachel Carson. Here again, I miss hearing Weis’ reflection on this darker feature of Merton’s evolving ecological consciousness. While she applauds him for refusing to cave to what she suggests is Milosz’s Manichaeism regarding *other-kind* of nature, neither she nor other commentators call Merton on

13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 290-97.

14. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as “DWL” parenthetically in the text.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 65.

what could arguably be his own dualistic and negative regard for *human-kind* of nature.

This chapter's theme of "seeing differently" continues with a consideration of Merton's use of extended metaphor (77-81), his psychic and linguistic ease in dressing himself in ecological features. He shape-shifts repeatedly from whale, to desert, to canary, as faults grow out of him like tobacco (*ES* 296). In sub-marine images he describes contemplation as an oceanic experience where "big blue, purple, green and gray fish swim by," until he finds himself swimming with God, yet paradoxically awakens from the prayer with not the sea, but "the sky inside" (*ES* 468). Merton not only practices refined attention to the ways nature compenetrates him, but his mindfulness is also trained on the ways it displays itself all around him in the natural liturgies of weather and the complexities of climate. His habit of reporting every nuance of an Earth day as a way to begin or end his journal entries is a spiritual exercise that sharpens his environmental consciousness. How very keen is his understanding of the way this planet actually works in this declaration: "I myself am part of the weather . . . the climate . . . the place" (*TTW* 300). Weis reminds us that for Merton, *habitat* was "*habitus*" – a way to be in place with place, of indwelling in dwelling (86).¹⁶ By such cultivated sensibility he came to move beyond an appreciation of the objects of the natural world to an experience of their subjectivity – a transition to the unitive way. In fact, the weather became a school for such "seeing differently" in which he learned to read the book of creation in its polyglot and polymorphous languages of season, rain, temperature and how all these speak to human sense and soul. Weis lingers with Merton in the unitive field of "weather as teacher" (86-89), because it is the primordial tutor of Earth literacy and attunement. By richly invoking nineteenth-century poets to underscore the influence of weather and climate on spiritual imagination and our development as earthlings, Weis notes too its influence on Merton's contemplative life, such that the sky is his prayer, as are the bird, the wind, the trees.¹⁷ Weis closes this chapter repeating one of her core insights: Merton came to a deeply contemplative integration of outer and inner landscapes so that "when your mind is silent,

16. Weis cites Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 225.

17. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 94.

then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God" (ES 471).

Probing this merger of inner and outer landscapes further in chapter 5, Weis poses her own *koan*: "If one is awake, can one become more awake?" (26). The affirmation in Merton's case is traced from *Seeds of Contemplation* to *New Seeds of Contemplation* where she subtly highlights Merton's nuanced contemplative development as one text matures into the other (94-98). Reading across editions the reader sees more clearly Merton's deepening incarnational sensibility and spirituality, the intensifying intimacy with and transformation by nature that becomes the ground and climate of deification. Creation never fails to bring him to the praise of God, which turns then to a more ecstatic praise of creation, more profoundly perceived as the body of divinity. As the physical senses surrender in receptivity to planetary vitality, the spiritual senses awaken their perceptivity of divine life coursing through it all. "I know where He is," Merton playfully answers the Magi in an Epiphany reverie: "He and I live in the trees" (ES 464).

In a presentation of such passages from his journals and notebooks, Weis demonstrates her encyclopedic sense of where and how everything ecological fits within the five-decade span of Merton's life, offering the reader a rich organic tapestry to read in well-appointed detail – a tapestry which is a puzzle she assembles before our eyes so we can see as clearly as she all the wide and deep developments of Merton's environmental vision. And though she systematically constructs a visual narrative of Merton's ecological development through his poetry, metaphor and prayer, one could easily take up any chapter at random and still see the sacred naturalist whole. Working her preferential hermeneutic of bringing Merton into dialogue with other nature writers, she casts familiar passages of Merton's nature writing in relief by highlighting the "*sitz-im-leben*" from which they arise and how they demonstrate the discrete thesis of each of her chapters. As Merton's inner and outer landscapes merge, we can sense his praise become more "*ecodox*" – if I may coin a phrase – more celebratory of nature. While the linearity of his actual biography in Weis' reading is rung round by the circularity of his biophilic reflections, when seen whole through her eyes, we glimpse the integral unity of Merton's life lived on this living Earth. As Weis exposes Merton's exquisite interlacing of natural and spiritual vocabularies we hear in his own voice a psalmody evocative of

various schools of praise sounding in the Christian tradition: the Song of Songs, Odes of Solomon, the canticles of Cîteaux and Carmel – all redolent with paradisaical motifs. She reveals him reading lauds in a forest lectory, a sun-filled basilica of pines, freed from the torpor-inducing fluorescent lights of the monastery (*TTW* 140). In her well-positioned selections we move with the monk who is becoming cosmic communicant, coming to his incarnational senses in eremitic embrace of the living Earth, where he marries the forest in contemplative consummation (*DS* 49).

To illustrate the merging of inner and outer landscapes, she returns in her fugal style to repetitions of her own narrative, and to recurrent motifs played now in different thematic keys. To my complete delight, she walks us through two of Merton's most familiar and powerful works: "Fire Watch" (*SJ* 349-62) and *Hagia Sophia*.¹⁸ Through the eyes of this sensitive literary scholar we see the way Merton's own literary cultivation and craft are fundamental to his contemplative writing – how form and detail evocatively interface to create spellbinding prose. I especially appreciate her exposition of these two pieces with rich commentary and context that cuts through any familiarity and brings new insight (112-17). Drawing our awareness to Merton's use of chronology and temporality, we are lured into a sense of the flow of epiphanic time, and with it, the simultaneity of inner and outer landscapes. One technique Merton employed to slow down and train his ecological eye was photography, which became for him a focused way of beholding the "suchness" of the natural world. In time looking through the lens of a camera was a skillful means of paying attention, learning to see with Zen-like discipline while practicing the art of beholding. Likewise his progressive movement toward eremitism radically transformed his vow of stability, as "place" moved from a particular monastic foundation to wilderness, and his sense of belonging migrated from a Trappist commune to a parcel of land. Soon his woodland hermitage became both home and hospice where he could dwell familiarly with mystics and Zen masters whose company quickened his "paradise consciousness," sharpened his cosmic eye, and who likewise were the welcome wedding guests at his sylvan nuptials.

In chapter 6, "Merton's Evolving Ecological Consciousness," Weis finally brings us to consider the emergence of Merton's sense

18. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363-71.

of environmental justice as the denouement of his turning toward the world. This turn was accelerated in the 1960s by his intensive dialogue with cultural creatives with whom he carried on a correspondence of social, political, literary, artistic, ecclesiastical and monastic critique. In this period of return to the world marked by his Fourth and Walnut epiphany, Merton comes to see the deepening theological flaw of his contemptuous flight from the world, and begins to assess his place in and responsibility for it. His monastic exclaustation that returned him to the simplicity of nature, seemed to transform his voice from ironic culture critic to compassionate man of praise (127-28). Circling back to Merton's encounter with Carson, Weis resounds his concern to diagnose "the ills of our civilization" (128) named again as humankind's "dreadful hatred of life" itself (128), an inversion that has turned us against all that is good. Yet this rehearsal of Merton's letter to Carson brings us over the same existential ground, surveying more the symptoms of our ills, rather than offering any real diagnosis of the pathology causing them – a diagnosis, rendered perhaps more theopoetically, which is actually present in Merton's writing, and which bears relevance to his environmental vision.

Merton's *Literary Essays* (which collection Weis does not reference in her book) offer at least two significant reflections on this dreadful hatred of life and its source. One is found in "A Theology of Creativity," where Merton offers another of his frequent considerations of the Genesis/Creation trope: "The creative love of God was met, at first, by the destructive and self-centered refusal of man: an act of such incalculable consequences that it would have amounted to a destruction of God's plan, if that were possible."¹⁹ Indeed, throughout his literary corpus one hears a profound lamentation for humanity's refusal to be with God the governors and gardeners of paradise, choosing instead a vocation of desecration and de-creation (*LE* 355 ff.). In stark language he speaks of the inversion of human consciousness – the loss of what I have termed "the paradise mind." Such loss constitutes our fall into amnesia of our Edenic neighborhood, and gives rise to a sense of separation and isolation from the community of creation. The fruit of this alienation, as Merton teaches, is wholesale death by way of murder – murder of the eco-sphere, and even the murder of

19. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 369; subsequent references will be cited as "*LE*" parenthetically in the text.

God, not so much by willful malice, as by a new code of perverse “scientific” consciousness.

This second insight is found in Merton’s essay on Faulkner, “Baptism in the Forest,” where he casts light on a mind-state that excludes the kind of wisdom and initiation discovered only “by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a communion in cosmic awareness and in nature. . . . a wisdom based on love . . . apprehended almost unconsciously in the forest; love for the ‘spirits’ of the wilderness and of the cosmic parent (both Mother and Father)” (LE 108). Ignorant of such wisdom, Merton laments, our species forgets our true name and nature, our true home and vocation. Centering ourselves on ourselves we lose our center in Being Itself; therefore we do not know who and what and where we really are. Like Prometheus and the Prodigal – two other recurring archetypes in Merton’s work which get to the source of our profound disorientation – we resort to stealing from God the inheritance of vital being that is freely and unfailingly given.²⁰ This confusion, this self-inversion, constitutes our existential crisis, our deepest disorientation as we run from the source of life to our own productions and generations of fictitious existence. Squandering ourselves in a fragmenting disbursement of consciousness, Merton will insist, we fall into dysfunctional unconsciousness – a mindless, trustless, fearful, and rapacious pursuit of life, destructive of our own and Earth’s well-being. This indeed is our existential if not primordial blindness, which cries out for the healing seen in Merton’s environmental vision.

Invoking the raven again as totem of Merton’s prophetic voice, Weis makes links between his evolving awareness that social justice must widen to ecological justice, and hubris must yield to the ecological virtue of humility if we are to recover our cosmic sight. In her re-reading of Merton’s letter to Carson, Weis identifies three features of this vision that funds deep eco-spirituality: an aesthetic sense of nature as sacrament; a sense of radical kinship and inter-being of all life; a deep compassion and responsibility for the natural world – each of which is elaborated in fresh litanies of Merton’s salutations to creation. We also read of his ambivalence toward Teilhard de Chardin, and “those city Christians” that inspire his rant on “nature ‘humanism,’”²¹ and provoke an emphatic

20. See “Prometheus: A Meditation,” in Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 11-23; RU 79-88.

21. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals*,

refusal to renounce the luxury of nature. Is he recounting here his conflict with Rosemary Radford Ruether, who challenged him on this very affluence and to whom his response was so quick and visceral? I wondered why Weis did not include this very contentious correspondence in her book, for it speaks especially to the concern of this final chapter.²²

The volley of letters between Merton and Ruether is relevant to a sense of Merton's environmental vision. They go on for two years and cover many subjects in a range of emotional valences; yet, most interesting are Merton's seminal thoughts on eco-monasticism which surface in this correspondence. In 1967 Ruether levels a fierce critique of Merton's monastic choice as archaic, anomalous, institution-bound, in service of its own mythology. The struggle for the realm of God is in the world, she insists, against the principalities and powers that hold it captive. In great detail the liberation theologian recounts for the Trappist hermit the creation-denying ethos and praxis of monasticism, its history of flight from the real world of conflict to the romantic refuge of nature. There is only one validating posture for contemporary monasticism, she insists: become a ministry to the world for the world. "If monasticism could view itself as a ministry, as a place to which the whole church could have recourse as a place of contemplation, but contemplation for the sake of the main arena of salvation which takes place precisely in the sphere of historical action, then it could take on a new relevance for modern man" (AHW 30).

Merton's answer to Ruether is immediate and visceral, sounding the fundamental ecological import of monastic structures and sensibility: "monastic life is in closer contact with God's good creation and is in many ways simpler, saner, and more human than life in the supposedly comfortable, pleasurable world. One of the things I love about my life . . . is the fact that I live in the woods and according to a tempo of sun and moon and season in which it is naturally easy and possible to walk in God's light . . . through his creation. . . . I seldom have to fuss with . . . 'recollecting myself' All you do is breathe and look around" (AHW 34-35).

vol. 6: 1966-1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 208; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.

22. Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff, OP (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); subsequent references will be cited as "AHW" parenthetically in the text.

In this penultimate chapter, Weis brings forth her own prophetic passion in concert with a chorus of eco-feminists, theologians, and naturalists. She gleans any fruit of Merton's eco-spirituality that may have escaped her well-trained eye; she fills in with more detail whatever facet of this mosaic of Merton's eco-vision may have been overlooked. We see how his studies of Zen and Celtic spirituality enhanced both the discipline and lyricism of his ecological consciousness, with Irish nature poetry in particular heightening his awareness of thin places and "ecotone" – the interface of two nourishing eco-systems. We hear him say that the most crucial responsibility of the Christian in the technological era is creation care (DWL 227-28). In bringing us once again to that *Day of a Stranger*, Weis recovers an excised paragraph full of pathos and prophecy concerning the "non-ecology" (DWL 240) that Merton and we live with, thus absenting us from "the wedding feast" (LL 19). As she moves in precise chronological order over his writings, Weis finds, day-by-day, subtle and dramatic evidence of his evolving ecological consciousness. In other letters to high school and graduate students, to professors and poets, to internationals and progressive academics, Merton discloses himself as naturalist and conservationist, environmental advocate and activist, who would have American monks protect wilderness so threatened by technological and human development because it is a domain of paradise.

Weis researches again Merton's Working Notebooks to offer a gestalt of what was informing his thinking a year before his death, especially his review of Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, titled "The Wild Places."²³ This very important essay – Merton's last published statement on the challenges facing society (150) – is a small tour-de-force summary of the American relationship to wilderness. It synthesizes Merton's ecological awareness and voices his prophetic challenge to his American readers to heal our twisted thinking regarding nature. The final correspondence noted in this chapter, evocative of Merton's evolving ecological consciousness, is to the contemporary futurist, Barbara Hubbard (WF 72-75). To her he proclaims his affirmation of Aldo Leopold's expansion of the Golden Rule: the pledge to love and protect nature as the full term of moral development. Weis

23. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 95-107; for a more complete version of this essay, see above, pages 15-28.

brings this stunning chapter to a close noting that Merton would undoubtedly have been in the vanguard of contemporary nature writers and environmentalists had he lived into the ecological devastation that is triggering our environmental awakening, and adding this poignant memory: when his body was flown back from Bangkok, one of the few personal items to accompany him was his membership card in The Wilderness Society.

Monica Weis might well have ended her exceptional work here, but offered us the gift of an "Afterword" – a meditation on Merton's fascination with the woodland deer (157-65). This stunning coda becomes "An Ecological Journey in Miniature," in which Weis sounds her own poetic voice, inviting us to shadow Merton in his deep fascination and intimacy with the deer with whom he shares his field, his life. Indeed, the deer becomes metaphor for the illusive, shy, wild creature that is the true self, and the animal of our nature. In his contemplative practice of abiding with his companioning deer, he recognizes shared being. Intimacy opens to eros as Merton courts the deer, who lead him to a kind of ecstatic compassion and communion with all living beings. These are his kin whom he must protect – their bodies, their habitat, their security and silence. No more a guilty bystander: he must now develop an ecological conscience (165).

It pleased me to finally hear of the transformational encounter with M. who brought Merton to an incarnate sense of shared paradise. In his poetry for her, he celebrates an encompassing erotics rooted in Eden, recovered in the Song of Songs, and in the climactic awareness that all Love, all Being, is one. In Weis's sensitive and probing reading of Merton's "A Midsummer's Diary" (LL 301-48), we hear him sing of the expansive romance to which his own "wild being" committed him – a marriage to Earth herself.

This is a marvelous book, a real contribution to the on-going *ressourcement* of Thomas Merton's ecological wisdom, which it discloses to be remarkably prescient. As one who has considered similar themes in Merton's writings, I salute my colleague Monica Weis for bringing a stunning comprehensiveness and comprehension to the exposition of Merton's environmental vision. With an easy and graceful hold on his vast and rangy corpus, she captures, with a hawk's eye for meaning-laden detail, almost every ecological reference running through Merton's writings. What makes this book so rich and unique however is not simply the harvesting of Merton's environmental thought, but Weis' own literary creativ-

ity, her familiarity with simultaneous and intersecting currents of both contemporary environmentalism and “creation spirituality.” Her facility to add depth and texture to any bold fact by exposing its historical, social, cultural, and literary context is also a bonus tutorial of this work.

More so, Weis delivers her own sensitive spiritual insight with characteristic fluidity, letting this book read like a literary fugue resonating with symphonic complexity and lyrical richness. Her rich reportage of Merton’s close encounters with and descent toward the mystical ground of the natural world lets us in on his *eco-poetics* (if that is a term of currency), interpreting for us his “*lingua terra*” (if that might be another): the many languages of his cosmic praise, and the singular voice of his prophetic eco-consciousnesses and conscience. In the end, what Weis leaves us with in this pioneering work is not simply a summary of Merton’s eco-biography, but a comprehensive seminar in the ways and means of inducing our own ecological vision.

Kathleen Deignan, CND

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When I was in theological school in England in the sixties, we began our worship day on Tuesdays with the office of prime at 6:45 a.m., winter and summer. In those long-gone days, the office hymn at prime began: “Now that the daylight fills the sky, / We lift our hearts to God on high.” I found it mildly humorous that in the winter we sang this in the pitch dark, no daylight whatever in evidence. I felt that there was something out of sync about this; and I knew it related to the invention of clocks. But I wasn’t then able to articulate the larger issue behind it. That issue is, of course, the issue of technology, spirituality and ecology, our relationship as spiritual persons in a technologically-driven society to the natural order; and it is that issue which is the subject of *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, a book which firmly establishes Merton as an ecological pioneer.

I found it appropriate that as I was finishing my reading of this book, it rained all day. This evoked for me Merton’s celebration of the “uselessness” of rain in “Rain and the Rhinoceros,”¹ and brought me close to the reality of the weather, a subject to which Monica Weis gives substantial and thoughtful attention in her book.

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23.