

Review Symposium

WEIS, Monica, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, Foreword by James Conner, OCSO (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. xvi + 197. ISBN 978-0-8131-3004-0 (cloth) \$40.00.

In February 1968, ten months before his tragic death in Bangkok, Thailand, Thomas Merton foresaw one of the most significant moral and spiritual conflicts of the twenty-first century, that between “a millennial consciousness” and “an ecological consciousness.” As he wrote to Barbara Hubbard, the former is an intensification of the dream of modernity: establishing a human paradise on earth through the technological, economic and political engines of “progress.” Merton rightly feared that such a campaign, marked by “commercialism, hubris, and cliché” would be conducted “by immolating our living earth, by careless and stupid exploitation for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreplaceable loss in living species and natural resources.” Ecological consciousness counters anthropocentric hubris in its understanding that “[w]e belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them.” Merton reminds us that “[w]e are not alone in this thing” and directs us to “bring the rest of the living along with us” into whatever “new era” we fantasize. In the same letter, Merton praises Albert Schweitzer’s reverence-for-life ethics and strongly endorses Aldo Leopold’s concept of the “ecological conscience” as a basis for a new ethic. Such an ethic flows from “a deepening of the ecological sense” and mandates “restraint and wisdom” in the way we “treat the earth we live on and the other members of the ecological community.”¹

In *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, Monica Weis carefully chronicles Merton’s own development of an ecological sense and consciousness. His increased sensitivity to nature and natural places led to a sense of moral responsibility for them, clearly evident in this 1968 letter. But also evident is a sharp social critique

1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 73-75; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.

with roots in Merton's "turn to the world" in the late 1950s and his passionate concern with the political, social, and economic issues of his time. As Weis notes, it was especially with his epiphanic reading of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) that Merton began to make connections between his own maturing "ecological sense" and his wider social and moral concerns.

In Merton's January 12, 1963 letter to Carson, so wonderfully analyzed and contextualized by Weis, the monk expresses a deep concern about human violence towards the earth and suggests that the root of the problem goes much deeper than most people imagine. His analysis of modernity's troubling relationship to the natural world in both his 1963 and 1968 letters anticipates what becomes known as *radical ecology*. Radical ecologists hold, as did Merton, that the environmental crisis is not simply the result of a few miscalculations but is deeply rooted (*radix*) in modernity itself. Some, like social ecologists, focus on socio-economic roots, and others, like deep ecologists and some eco-feminists, on conceptual-spiritual roots. Thomas Merton was convinced that one root system connected both areas. He tells Carson that he sees "a *consistent pattern* running through everything that we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life" (WF 70).

A complete presentation of Merton's radical ecology awaits a fuller exploration of the connections, explicit and implicit, between his writings on economic, political and social criticism and those on theological and spiritual ecology. Professor Weis has laid a solid foundation for that endeavor. But it is in her well-documented account of how one person was transformed through a series of intimate encounters with nature and natural others that her special contribution is to be found. As we know, most of Merton's best writings on nature are based on personal experience and take the form of journal entries, letters, poems and reflective essays. Drawing upon these, Weis skillfully weaves a narrative of Merton's growing awareness of and intimacy with the natural world. She emphasizes the *context* (place, time) within which he experiences nature and the *texts* through which he interprets, expresses and conveys these experiences, with less attention to the explicit or implicit ethical, philosophical or theological *content*. Through her careful and sensitive reading of these texts and her re-contextualizing of the experiences that inspired them, Sr. Monica is able to identify a way of *seeing* and responding to nature that raises questions about and presents an alternative to the narrow range of modernist options

for experiencing and thinking about nature.

The fact that Merton and Weis rely heavily on narrative forms to express and explore these alternative ways would not be surprising to most radical ecologists. Eco-feminist Karen Warren encourages environmental thinkers “to explore the use of first-person narrative as a way of raising philosophically germane issues” that are “often lost or underplayed” in academic and mainstream environmental philosophy and ethics.² Radical ecologist Mick Smith agrees, insisting that “environmental narratives” are an important way to “subvert the abstraction of subject from habitat” that is characteristic of modern thought and to portray the individual as one involved “in ecological intimacies.”³ Weis notes the frequency and power of such intimacies, pointing out how “the reader of multiple volumes of journal reflections . . . discovers that Merton’s developing intimacy with nature reveals an ongoing, sustaining transformation in consciousness and spirituality” (98).

The inner dynamic of this transformation challenges the modernist view of nature as passive, either as a resource that we take or as a screen onto which we project human-centered values. First-person accounts of these encounters reveal nature as active in shaping “the ecological character of personhood.”⁴ Dr. Weis draws upon journal entries to show how over time and through this interplay of “inner and outer geography . . . Merton [becomes] ever more awake” (97) and ever more sensitive to the other. His many aesthetic and religious “experiences of immersion in nature” help “create the foundation for Merton’s evolution toward a level of responsibility for the welfare of nature and his development of an ecological consciousness” (72). As in Wendell Berry’s novels, nature “shapes moral response” but now from “within personal environmental experience” and not from a process of abstract reasoning (Jenkins 53).

Similarly, narrative more easily reveals the relational structure of environmental experiences. For Warren, “narrative gives voice to a felt sensitivity . . . a sensitivity to conceiving of oneself as

2. Karen Warren, “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism,” in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Louis P. and Paul Pojman, sixth ed. (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012) 594; subsequent references will be cited as “Warren” parenthetically in the text.

3. Mick Smith, *An Ethics of Place* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001) 54; subsequent references will be cited as “Smith” parenthetically in the text.

4. Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 55; subsequent references will be cited as “Jenkins” parenthetically in the text.

fundamentally 'in relationship with' others, including the non-human environment" (Warren 595). Merton's journals are filled with observations of and close encounters with natural others – from lizards to hawks, and Weis beautifully reviews Merton's relationship with woodland deer in the "Afterword" (157-65). Merton's experience supports Smith's view that ethics is based on "*the emergence into significance of the other.*" This takes place "in myriad ways, sometimes suddenly, sometimes slowly, from the interplay of individual, culture, and nature." Significance is not unilaterally imposed. The natural other is "active in framing and constituting what becomes significant." The song of a warbler, the smell of gardenias, the touch of a moth on the hand, make us awake and attentive: "they impinge upon our *consciousness* and our *conscience*" (Smith 219). One gradually develops a "practical 'ecological' sense" for what is proper and fitting in a particular ecological context. The correct action is not determined using "reason's specific codes" but "can only come from an awakening, a feeling, for what is fitting with respect to natural places and our nonhuman fellows, and this feeling can, in turn, only come about through practicing and experiencing the desire and wonder that natural others can produce in our lives" (Smith 216). Monica Weis would undoubtedly endorse this statement and might recount how, on one occasion, Merton was so entranced by several deer that he was observing that he could almost feel the softness of their coats and *desired* to touch them even as he stood in *wonder* at their untouchable spiritual essence (158).

Eco-feminists would define the kind of ethics that emerges from Merton's experience of nature and his nonhuman fellows as an ethics of care. As Smith writes, "Only when we come to *sense* the presence of otherness in and around us . . . will we start to care. Only through care and consideration will the Earth become a place worth living in, a 'garden' for everyone to share" (Smith 220). The way of living and *seeing* that Merton developed differs from modernity because it "encourages an ethical, rather than an instrumental, relation to the natural world." In contrast to instrumental rationality, rooted in individual and social abstraction from nature, this *heartfelt ethics* grows out of a "feeling for life and our place within it," and involves both "an ecological *habitus* and an ethics of place" (Smith 218).

Not coincidentally, Weis suggests that Merton's "sense of place" (39) plays an important role in his emerging ecological consciousness. Merton's autobiography as well as later reminiscences point

to a boy and a young man in love with and incredibly sensitive to places. In 1941, the young man sank his roots into the rich physical and spiritual soil of Gethsemani and for the rest of his life fostered the habits of heart and mind that in their attentiveness to the unique qualities of different places challenged modernism's attempt to make all space homogeneous. In a world where space has become "disenchanted and profane" and every place "opened up to exploitation" (Smith 208), Merton reminds us of the beauty, integrity and sacredness of natural places and with vivid language reimagines a hierophanous world.

Attentive to his surroundings, present to landscape and open to its nuances, Merton came to experience the "power of place," writes Weis. This strengthened his "habit of awareness" and led to a deep coherence "between the external landscape and the landscape of the heart" (39). This coherence included the natural inhabitants of place and awakened his conscience, for the spatial metaphors of an ethics of place imply "*giving others room* to develop and not *shaping* their existence solely for our own instrumental ends" (Smith 219) – in short, allowing space for the significance of the other to emerge. Positively, it means protecting and promoting the potential of others to "maintain their differences and create their own space for development" (Smith 219). A rich description of place and its *in-habitants*, as one finds in Merton, "helps us to get a feeling for the meaning of this ethics" (Smith 218). The reader's attentive engagement is important for this *heartfelt* ethics.

Monica Weis has obviously developed such a feeling through her sensitive reading of Thomas Merton and has crafted her work in such a way as to share her experience with her readers and to invite us to plunge into Merton's works. Hopefully, through a *care-full* reading of her work and his, we will grow in our own sensitivity to and care for places and for the natural (and human) beings with whom we share this one planetary home (*oikos*). In short, may Monica Weis's wonderful study awaken in us an ecological consciousness and conscience. This would, indeed, be a much needed and significant contribution – and an act of radical ecology.

Donald P. St. John

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Not all new books on Thomas Merton should be greeted with "joyous acclamation" (as the happy phrase of the Easter anthem of my youth put it). Sr. Monica's book should be so greeted because