

weapons the global use of which, as we know, would constitute an ecological disaster of the highest order, just as the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) have characterized this ghastly possibility in relation to their own profession as constituting the most serious public health challenge possible.

The late and much-lamented Vaclav Havel, post-Soviet president of Czechoslovakia, and its western successor state, the Czech Republic, offers us all an overarching word on the ecological crisis. It will not be resolved, he says, until the global community has recovered a sense of the earth as sacred. Merton's sense of this, ripening gradually from the time of his childhood in France until it was jolted into intentionality by his reading of *Silent Spring*, quickly moved to a place of committed responsibility, as must ours. Monica Weis ends her book with a call to the development of the same kind of ecological conscience, the kind that leads to action. Her book is a welcome addition to the literature of the movement for the recovery of the earth's sacredness, a movement which in its largest sense challenges us all to act on behalf of the integrity, the shalom of creation.

Donald Grayston

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I am grateful to editors David Belcastro and Gray Matthews for the invitation to participate in this review symposium of my new book, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, and I am doubly indebted to colleagues Donald St. John, Bonnie Thurston, Kathleen Deignan and Donald Grayston for being willing to read the text closely, offer their insights, and suggest next steps for this initial foray into the influence of nature on Merton's spirituality. My hope is that my exploration of Merton's writings, primarily his journals, will nudge other scholars to build on this foundation and expand our collective appreciation for the wide spectrum of Merton's interests and concerns.

In this response, I will speak to the large issues raised by several of the reviewers, and then to particular points. Since this is a book about Merton's interaction with nature, I want to emphasize not only the importance of discovering a responsibility to and for nature, that sprang from his solitude and contemplation, but also his evolving prophetic stance on ecology in the turbulent 1960s. That said, I applaud Donald St. John for affirming that Merton "anticipates and articulates the basic position of *radical ecology*." He is, indeed a forefather of the movement later known as deep

ecology, a term coined in 1973 by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (sometimes spelled Nass). Naess, like Merton, was significantly influenced by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and saw, again like Merton, that there is a pattern of overwhelming destructiveness in human decision-making. Naess's work – a recognition of the inherent value of all creation, as opposed to its utility for human needs – focuses on the interdependence of organisms in multiple ecosystems. This new philosophy gave rise to the field of environmental ethics and blossomed into the bible for this movement: *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*.<sup>1</sup> In this seminal work, the authors, sociologist Bill Devall and philosopher George Sessions, define *radical* or deep ecology as “a process of ever-deeper questioning of ourselves, the assumptions of the dominant worldview in our culture, and the meaning and truth of our reality” (Devall & Sessions 8). Merton's writing during the last years of his life certainly resonates with this process; moreover, I believe Merton would applaud Devall and Sessions' advocacy of *ecosophy*: a shift from science to wisdom (Devall & Sessions 74). This movement appears briefly in Merton's letter to Carson when he suggests the importance of discovering, in humility, the harmony between technology and wisdom. We must not invest science with importance more than its due – a challenge that continues today. There is a revealing caution at the end of Devall and Session's first chapter to which, I believe, Merton would ascribe: “We must not be misled by our zeal for change so that we are concerned only with the narrow self or ego. . . . Change in persons requires a change in culture and vice versa. We cannot ignore the personal arena nor the social, for our project is to enhance harmony with each other, the planet, and ourselves” (Devall & Sessions 14). This caution certainly echoes Merton's distinction between a millennial consciousness (one that believes technology has all the answers) and an ecological consciousness (one that recognizes a more holistic view of how beings interact and depend on each other). So, yes, I agree with Donald St. John that Merton “articulates and anticipates the basic position of radical ecology.”

St. John's discussion of the current frontiers of ecological think-

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1. Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1985); subsequent references will be cited as “Devall & Sessions” parenthetically in the text. Devall died in 2009, but Sessions continues to publish: see also *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambala, 1995).

ing reinforces the need to connect *habitus* with *heartfelt ethics*. He acknowledges writers today who are moving in this direction. In addition to Karen Warren and Mick Smith, with their emphasis on the importance and validity of personal narrative and experiential context, we now have a bevy of accomplished writers in sub-fields of ecology, such as ecocriticism, ecoethics, ecophilosophy, ecoculture, ecojustice, ecohistory, and urban ecology, to name just a few. The twenty-year-old Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) publishes a fine quarterly journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE)* that showcases some of the best cutting-edge thinking, experiencing and reflecting. A recent and welcome addition to the field of eco-spirituality is Steven Chase's pace-setting volume, *Nature as Spiritual Practice*, a serious investigation of the interpenetration of matter and spirit and its consequences for human living in the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

Early on, St. John makes the point that Merton is transforming his thinking as his concern for social issues becomes wider. I would support his statement, believing that were the centuries exchanged, Ralph Waldo Emerson might very well have considered Merton a candidate for a chapter in his *Representative Men* – those exemplary philosophers, poets and mystics of human history who significantly contributed to human development.<sup>3</sup> Merton is a quintessential “Man Thinking,” welcoming a deeper examination of issues because our vocation is to be, as he writes to Carson, the “eye in the body.” There is more to be said about Merton and radical ecology and I invite scholars to build on the foundation I have laid and explore more fully, as St. John recommends, “the connections, explicit and implicit, between his economic, political, and social criticism, and his writings on contemplation and spiritual ecology.”

It is important, I think, to place Merton's responsibility for nature and his evolving ecological thought within the Christian story. Donald Grayston requests a more developed account of Merton's incarnational thinking and a clarification of my word “inserted” – which suggests to him that before the historical Jesus creation was not holy. In no way do I intend to imply this. Rather, I want

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2. Steven Chase, *Nature as Spiritual Practice* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

3. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Men* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010).

to emphasize the *kairos* moment of his birth and life. In speaking about Jesus as “the firstborn of all creation” in whom all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17), I want to emphasize that Jesus is the apex of creation. Perhaps some language from creation theology will soften the abruptness Grayston perceives. While not actually Merton’s words, they resonate with Merton’s journal reflections when he is most consciously aware of the cosmic Christ – knowing that God is holy, incomprehensible mystery and at the same time present to us in ourselves and in all creation as the ground of our being allows us to appreciate both God’s transcendence and immanence. God’s creative love is not a one-time historical occurrence but continues to unfold in our world today. Theologian Karl Rahner would call this God’s ongoing self-communication that is most fully spoken in the Word, Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Or as spiritual writer Judy Cannato so elegantly phrases it, Jesus was not only uniquely positioned in history to recognize this unfolding love but had a “unique capacity to receive that love.” The “fully human Jesus was a full participant in the evolutionary unfolding of the cosmos.”<sup>5</sup> Because of deep contemplative listening, Jesus understood his relationship to Abba and his relationship to each being around him that was also a unique expression of the Holy One. In short, Jesus understood that matter and spirit are essentially one.

Another aspect of Merton’s incarnational theology is his study of and interest in Celtic spirituality that also acknowledges this fusion of transcendence and immanence. Merton’s experience of the unity of all things and his keen insight into power of the “thin places” allowed him at certain times to merge his inner and outer landscape. Donald Grayston commented that my dichotomy between natural and supernatural is an older, hierarchical one. To better describe the “thin places,” he offers “visible and invisible” which harmonizes with the Nicene Creed. I wholeheartedly agree with his suggestion and his reasoning. I would also add to the discussion that the traditional Celtic phrasing of the “thin places” – those places where the veil between this world and the Other World (heaven, kingdom, paradise) is lifted – are those places where people feel more intimately connected to God’s presence and perceive something of God’s glory. This is, as A. M. (Donald)

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4. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1993) 180-89.

5. Judy Cannato, *Field of Compassion: How the New Cosmology Is Transforming Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Soren Books, 2010) 68.

Allchin has written of the Welsh heritage, the “world understood as the place of God’s presence,”<sup>6</sup> the place where the seen and unseen worlds touch, the fusion of the sacred and secular. With characteristic charm, perhaps a Celtic proverb captures it best: “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller.” And, of course, I wholeheartedly agree with Grayston that Merton’s *Day of a Stranger* is a poignant exemplum of this experience.

Let me turn to Bonnie Thurston’s three-point review and two reservations, adding my gratitude for her “joyous acclamation” of my book, and offering some background information on the genesis of it.

*Range of Merton’s writing.* My appreciation to Bonnie Thurston and Kathleen Deignan for recognizing my attempt to sample the spectrum of Merton’s writing, what Deignan calls the “stunning comprehensiveness” of my references to his “vast and rangy corpus.” Several summers ago, I read straight through all seven volumes of Merton’s journals, highlighting the nature passages. That immersion began a gestation process, nourished by extended time at the Merton Archives at Bellarmine University to examine his unpublished reading notebooks. The confluence of Merton’s thoughts in his journals and his notebooks indicated to me an ongoing passion (perhaps even “obsession”) with nature and the ways in which it was simultaneously invading his prayer as well as supporting it. I use that word “invading” deliberately. Just as God was invading his heart through both formal and informal prayer, so too, was nature, creating a double-barreled experience of God’s transcendence and immanence. Constant references to nature might be unsettling for someone not grounded in an authentic experience of self and of God, but for Merton, all these references illustrate – even demonstrate – his monastic commitment to contemplation and launching out into the deep – a commitment that in the Benedictine spirit embraced holistic living.

*Rachel Carson as Touchstone:* I welcome Thurston’s acknowledgement of the power and wisdom of beginning and ending the book with Carson. In response to my first proposal to the University Press of Kentucky, one reader suggested I arrange the book chronologically and *not* begin with Carson. My written response to the acquisitions editor – which had to be reviewed and accepted

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6. A. M. Allchin, *God’s Presence Makes the World* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 1997).

by the assembled editorial board before a contract was issued – was in effect (but more politely stated): “I don’t think so. Who wants to work their way through four chapters of a book before you get to the main point? Granted, this is a tricky maneuver, but I am a good writer. I can make it work.” Once the full manuscript went out to the readers, the reviewer conceded that I had pulled it off. I think when I returned to Carson to round out my argument, it was clear to me that I could not just repeat the literary and autobiographical similarities between the two writers, but I had to show how Merton’s spirituality – as I had been describing the evolution of it – was embedded in this letter.

*Well-produced book.* I agree with Thurston that this is a well-produced book, but I can’t take total credit for it. The University Press of Kentucky produces stellar work, with meticulous in-house cartographers and designers. I did have to select my illustrations from hundreds of Merton’s photos in the Merton Archive. Ever-faithful Paul Pearson had the collection on his computer at the College English Association meeting in spring 2010; the two of us sat in a corner and clicked away on his laptop while I scribbled identification numbers on a scrap of paper to create my pool of possibilities. My initial choice of photos was later refined as I studied chapters to see what might be a picture not familiar to Merton readers and what visual might appropriately reinforce the point of that chapter.

*Two reservations:* 1) I share Thurston’s reluctance to put words in an author’s mouth and engage in fortune-telling about their next step. And for sure, Merton’s experiences in Asia might have refocused his energies, had he lived to return to the monastery. Nevertheless, I admit to having held this conviction for more than ten years as I have read and re-read Merton’s letters, notebooks, and public writings. “Mercurial” or not, I sense in the intensity and frequency of his comments a crescendo (to use a musical term) that is about to erupt into an *aria* or *scena* (as in nineteenth-century melodramatic Italian opera). Allow me to make a correlation here to Walt Whitman’s 1872 poem, “The Mystic Trumpeter,” which follows a pattern of recitative and aria for seven stanzas; in the eighth and final stanza, the poem explodes into sheer exuberance (an operatic *scena*) celebrating the unseen trumpeter, the evocation of history, and the foretaste of the future: “Enough to merely be! Enough to breathe! / Joy! Joy! all over joy!”<sup>7</sup> My point in arguing

7. Walt Whitman, “The Mystic Trumpeter,” *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley

for Merton's "unwritten" seminal ecological essay is to claim that Merton was not yet finished reinventing himself as an advocate for environmental responsibility; furthermore, his writings during the summer before his Asian trip do not indicate he is moving away from environmental concerns, but rather probing the issue ever more deeply and feverishly.

2) Sense of place: Donald St. John reinforces how important a sense of place is in developing an ecological vision and a "form of life," so I want to thank Bonnie Thurston for her keen observation about an important place in Merton's life. Neglecting Merton's experience at Oakham is an omission, noted as well by Donald Grayston (also caught by Bill Shannon), due entirely to scrambling to meet copy deadlines while teaching full-time and forgetting to revisit a talk I gave at Oakham in 2006 which highlighted Merton's time in England and nearby Brooke Hill. Perhaps I can include a vignette here that, in printed copy, would be a matching yet subordinate scene positioned after Merton's time in Saint-Antonin. The insertion might look something like this:

For three and a half years when Merton was at Oakham, studying classics and learning modern foreign languages, Merton remembered the lesson of contemplation he learned from the geography of Saint-Antonin. He often fled from the noisy dormitories, the enthusiasm of his debating society, his American jazz records, and his disdain for organized religion to seek the solitude and peace of Brooke Hill. In his unpublished novel, *The Straits of Dover*, he alludes to the power of landscape to feed his hungry spirit: "I liked to be alone on top of it [Brooke Hill] and not have to talk to anyone . . . not have to listen to anyone else talk. Then I would walk, or sit, up there for hours, not waiting for anything or looking for anything or expecting anything, but simply looking out over the wide valley, and watching the changes of the light across the hills, and watching the changes of the sky. . . . Sometimes I took paper and pencils up there, and sat under a tree drawing for an hour or two. But most of the time I just went up there to be there."<sup>8</sup>

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and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973) 468-71. The editor's note mentions that the trumpet might have been selected because of its association with the "music, inherent in nature, life, and the memory of things."

8. Quoted in William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 62; subsequent references will be cited as "Shannon, *Silent Lamp*" parenthetically in the text.

This confession is certainly a contrast to his reputation as “something of a rebel”<sup>9</sup> and a contrast to the budding orator who frequently took the less likely position on the debate topic, and the self-proclaimed agnostic who pressed his lips tightly together during required chapel attendance and recitation of the Apostles’ Creed. Brooke Hill was a landscape that gave Merton an anchor in his life. His words are revealing: “Most of all, I remember early winter sunsets on the hill. The sky would get streaked with slate colored clouds, and the west would fill with a soft pale crimson haze, with the sun a diffuse, red blur in the middle of it, hanging there for a long time, while the valleys darkened, and smoke spread flat over the frosty thatch of the villages, and the trees held their bare branches utterly still in the cold and silent air. Then you would walk home into the darkness of the valley, with your footsteps ringing loudly before you on the stony road” (Shannon, *Silent Lamp* 62-63).

Allow me to turn now more specifically to Kathleen Deignan’s comments. I am happy that Deignan, as well as Donald Grayston, picked up on the importance of “Dancing with the Raven” as a metaphor for Merton. This was the working title of my manuscript, but because the publishers wanted to feature my book as the third in their “Culture of the Land” series, I had to capitulate to their marketing strategy. The previous books in this series are *The Environmental Vision of C. S. Lewis* and *The Environmental Vision of Wendell Berry*. “Dancing,” however, really spells out for me Merton’s relationship with nature: his fascination in watching it, as one might watch the intricacies of the cha-cha or tango from the sidelines and then be drawn into the exuberance and passion of the moves. “Dancing” also speaks to me of the discipline of learning how to be in relationship with nature, as well as the spiritual insight of discovering God’s invitation to join in the General Dance of creation with all the paradoxical abandon and responsible nurturing that entails. And “raven,” paradoxical symbol though it is (as outlined in my introduction), signifies for me the soaring or cosmic view that Merton calls us to.

Deignan refers several times to the other literary voices I reference who underscore Merton’s “*ecopoesis*” (deep longing for belong-

9. G. Talbott Griffith, headmaster of Oakham, March 3, 1942, quoted in William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1997) xi; see also its revised edition *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005) 1.



ing in creation). While working on this book, it was clear to me that many writers and thinkers have had similar insights that Merton either knew about or unwittingly shared, and that astute reference to other voices would be important to reinforce the fact that Merton is not the only person in this world with an environmental vision. Poets, philosophers, scientists and public figures have been and continue to be part of the conversation about our place in creation and our responsibility as the self-conscious being of the cosmos. At the same time, I wanted to demonstrate that Merton's vision is unique. And this is where a theologian might join the conversation to explore what Deignan calls Merton's "rich *theopoiesis*." Deignan also acknowledges my "encyclopedic sense of where and how everything ecological fits." For this I thank her; juggling voices and visions was a mighty challenge, yet I want readers to value my work as the "first shake-down" of the complexities of this topic, a basic scaffolding for future writers to build on.

The need for further development of several of my points has been noted by several of the reviewers; Bonnie Thurston and Kathleen Deignan have named a couple of these nascent ideas. One is a search for a resolution of the interchange between Czeslaw Milosz and Merton about the horror of nature. But, can a resolution be found? Merton certainly acknowledges the simultaneous beauty and horror of the hawk eating its prey in the February 10, 1950 passage I discuss in chapter three, a perhaps unconscious allusion to Edmund Burke's study of the Sublime (an experience of simultaneous beauty / awe and terror / horror); Merton would certainly have been aware of this theory from his studies at Columbia University and his teaching of British literature at St. Bonaventure.<sup>10</sup> Thurston makes the point that Merton is really a "city boy" who can have only a romanticized notion of nature; Deignan notes that mention of this correspondence with Milosz would have been a good place to "probe the darkness of humanity" and tackle the misanthropic statements of Merton. To both critics, I need to acknowledge that their insights are grist for another essay, perhaps a theological explication written by someone with different expertise than mine.

Deignan mentions also that my re-examination of Merton's letter to Rachel Carson (chapter 6) is a "rehearsal" that should instead probe the diagnosis of the illness and not the symptoms. Her point

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10. See Edmund Burke, "Of the Sublime," *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Section vii.

is well taken, and her references to two of Merton's *Literary Essays* ("A Theology of Creativity" and "Baptism in the Forest") are on target and could have been fruitful here. For the sake of streamlining my focus, however, I chose to restrict my research primarily to Merton's journals, supported by examples from his unpublished and published writing. I can envision a re-examination of Merton's letter to Carson and the loss of "the paradise mind" (as Deignan has termed it) as rich fodder for a subsequent essay, perhaps written by Deignan herself with her keen theological eye. Likewise, a thorough examination of the Merton-Ruether correspondence in the light of Merton's *theopoesis* and evolving environmental commitment could become a future writing project.

I appreciate Deignan's acknowledgement of the "simultaneous and interacting currents of both contemporary environmentalism and 'creation spirituality'" in my text, as well as her appreciation of my treatment of "Fire Watch" and *Hagia Sophia* with its "rich commentary and context that cuts through any familiarity and brings new insight." Having relied primarily on Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr's early, but sketchy, description of Victor Hammer's artwork, I inadvertently characterized the Christ Child as being in Mary's arms, instead of standing at her side – a point caught by Donald Grayston and verified by the article on *Hagia Sophia* by Patrick F. O'Connell in *The Merton Encyclopedia*.

And finally, a few specific responses to Donald Grayston's review. I am glad that so much of my book triggered memories, pertinent poems, and public figures, as well as connections to current world meetings. Grayston's sense of loss at the removal of the *Benedicite* from the Anglican liturgy is duly noted. For Merton, this prayer was especially powerful in those early morning hours in the woods. Perhaps, together, we can lobby for the prayer's return to Anglican practice. I applaud especially Grayston's ability to synthesize material from different chapters of my book, to perceive the trajectory of my argument, and appreciate the various pieces as I have laid them out. His discussion of "the monks and hermits of Camaldoli" is intriguing. I have found nothing substantive to suggest that Merton was aware of these monks' care for the forests, but they have been lauded in John Elder's *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh*.<sup>11</sup> Elder, director of the environmental studies program at

11. John Elder, *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006); sub-

Middlebury College, trekked through Europe to “pursue a dialogue between the landscapes of Tuscany and Vermont” (Elder 16) and explore how Italians have managed their natural resources. Without mentioning the order by name, Elder, in one of his lyrical meditations, acknowledges the monks of the Vallombrosa Abbey as the “summit in the history of conservation.” Their tending and protecting of the forest of Casentino, first for food from the chestnut trees, then for commercial purposes from the silver fir (masts and beams), makes this *Reserva Naturale* today a national wilderness of botanical diversity (Elder 42). It would be interesting to speculate – but this would be idle speculation – if and how Merton might have developed had he actually transferred to Camaldoli.

Although I believed that my book manuscript once mailed to the publisher indicated the book was “done,” I see now that there are several new trails that merit further investigation. Pioneers know the challenge of bushwacking into new territory, thus I repeat the invitation at the end of my introduction, “Dancing with the Raven” (8): “There are books yet to be written about Merton’s study of *theoria physica* and his commitment to the woods; biblical wilderness and paradise consciousness; the ability of nature to evoke memory; Merton’s vow of stability and the power of place. These ideas are just the tip of the iceberg.” Although I have been exploring this frontier of Merton and nature for several years, it is in many ways still virgin territory. With thanks to them and to my readers, I am moved to echo Merton’s advice: “When a thought is done with, let go of it. When something has been written, publish it, and go on to something else.”<sup>12</sup> My four colleagues who have agreed to participate in this symposium review have uncovered additional untrod lanes to inspect – perhaps a “something else” to discover. Who will join me in the exploration?

Monica Weis, SSJ

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sequent references will be cited as “Elder” parenthetically in the text.

12. Thomas Merton, Introduction to *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962) x.