

Introduction: Sophia's Romancing

Joseph Quinn Raab

“In every generation she passes into holy souls
And makes them friends of God, and prophets.”
Wisdom 7:27b

“There is a mystic thread of life
So dearly wreathed with mine alone,
That destiny's relentless knife
At once must sever *both or none*.”

Lord Byron

We don't often apply the term “philosopher” to Thomas Merton but perhaps he was first and foremost *a lover of wisdom*. He knew his beloved by many names and faces, but he preferred her as she appears passionately in the poetry of Jerusalem rather than in her formal dress—the clean abstractions of Athens. I like to think that he so loved Sophia that the two became one. He surrendered his voice to her and discovered his true freedom. The Thirteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, whose fruit largely comprises this current edition of *The Merton Annual*, was an occasion for many to reflect collectively on Merton's call to transform *our* hearts by *Living Together with Wisdom*. For this sophianic love is not jealous and possessive but inclusive and meant to be shared. Fittingly then, a common discernable thread running through this collection of fine essays is the tug of Sophia, the nameless *substance* we call *love*, romancing us into an ever-deepening friendship with God, a fruitful union producing prophecy.

This collection begins with three pieces focused on the relationship between “Tom” Merton and his longtime editor from *New Directions*, James “J” Laughlin. **Peggy Fox** explores the personal dimension of that friendship in “James Laughlin and Thomas Merton: ‘Louie, I Think This Is the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship.’” In this engaging piece Fox shows the relationship to be a symbiotic one where the worldly editor offered the monk a way “to free himself of his self-imposed shackles and engage in the world's struggles and as an artist to break conventional molds and recreate himself as a poet.” Conversely, the monk and poet offered J a way of retaining his personal authenticity while finding a connection to God—a “spiritual balm in a world that seemed to be fracturing.”

The next piece in this volume is Paul Wilkes' interview with **James Laughlin** about Thomas Merton, which was conducted on March 18, 1983. While a redacted version of this interview appeared in Wilkes' book *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*,¹ this is the first time the interview appears in full, carefully transcribed and edited by Paul M. Pearson. This version includes the specific questions Wilkes had asked Laughlin, which are omitted in the book, and helps the reader contextualize Laughlin's illuminating reminiscences. Laughlin's intimate recollections portray Merton as an ebullient and humble genius, a friend of God and prophet, whose enthusiasm for life and for God was irresistibly contagious, even for Laughlin, the self-described "heretic."

The third piece in this introductory trio is **Ian S. MacNiven's** "More Than Scribe: James Laughlin, Thomas Merton and *The Asian Journal*." As the title suggests, this fine piece of scholarship convincingly portrays Laughlin's herculean work that stands behind *The Asian Journal*. J spent almost three years painstakingly deciphering three separate notebooks, much of the content of which was nearly illegible, and some entirely so. In order to render the content intelligible to a New Directions audience J also compiled an impressive glossary. Beyond that, J had to track down some of Merton's interlocutors who appear in the journal to clarify the content and meaning of those ciphered texts. This is all the more impressive because J was simultaneously working through his own grief over the untimely death of his dear friend Tom. MacNiven presents J as nearly a co-author of this text since the fact that there is a golden narrative thread running through *The Asian Journal* is mostly due to J's loving labor.

Following that featured friendship this volume moves to ten articles, nine of which were originally presented in some form at the ITMS conference in Fairfield. The first of these is **Christopher Pramuk's** "'She Cannot Be a Prisoner': The Lure of Wisdom as Bearer of Hope." This beautifully compelling piece helps to frame many of the essays in this volume that follow. It offers a glimpse of divine Wisdom that begins with Merton's *Hagia Sophia* and moves on through holocaust narratives and post-holocaust theology, unveiling the One who can bestow a sacramental appreciation of the world as full of God, healing and "rushing out to us from every pore" as Fr. Alfred Delp put it, even in the midst of evil and suffering. Pramuk, through his struggles to understand "the music of divine mercy," has acquired or received a rare ability to help others glimpse the "diffuse shining of God."

In "Personal Bridges, Spiritual Communities: The Correspondence

1. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 3-13.

of Thomas Merton and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi,” **Edward Kaplan** offers an astute interpretation of an inter-contemplative friendship that gets underneath doctrinal divides to an ineffable reality grounding both gentile and Jew. Kaplan’s reading of the latter part of their dialogue raises the haunting question: is this ineffable reality indifferent or personal, static or dynamic, dead or alive? The correspondence of these two men reaches a rare and intimate sharing at what a Christian would call the foot of the cross. Their letters to one another expose a mutual vulnerability when they openly discuss doubt, dread and fear of annihilation. Yet through it all their humor and love prevail. This humor and love, percolating up from our deepest human weaknesses, looks like Sophia’s romancing—the trace of the One for whom both devotedly yearn.

Gordon Oyer’s piece breaks new ground by highlighting the influence of Louis Massignon on Merton’s peace activism. Merton readers readily recognize Massignon’s influence on Merton in other areas, introducing him to *le point vierge* and many Sufi writers, but in “Louis Massignon and the Seeds of Thomas Merton’s ‘Monastic Protest,’” Oyer highlights Massignon’s profound influence on Merton the peace activist—a sustained influence that helped Merton recognize the humanity of those on both sides of a conflict and to maintain a self-deprecating humor that disarms self-righteousness. Oyer shows how Massignon, not only through his writing but through his own living example, helped to ground Merton’s pacifism in Wisdom rather than ideology.

The next piece in this collection, “‘The Immense Mercy of God Was upon Me’: Thomas Merton’s Reading of the Russian Émigré Thinkers” by **Michael Plekon**, is the only one of these ten articles that was not originally presented at the conference. In it, Plekon helpfully shows how writers like George Fedotov, Sergius Bulgakov and Paul Evdokimov, among others, impacted Merton. These thinkers whom Merton had “devoured in roughly the last decade of his life” inform and support Merton’s theological vision of God as *Philanthropos*, the One who loves all without limitations, and Merton’s understanding of the contemplative as one who lives a realized eschatology—eroding the artificial divide between the sacred and the secular and becoming a bearer of this immense mercy.

In “‘The First Cistercian and the Greatest Trappist’: Thomas Merton’s Poems on John the Baptist,” **Patrick F. O’Connell** provides a masterful reading of three of Merton’s earlier poems all focused on the “contemplative prophet” whom Merton called his “great patron, friend and Protector.” This substantive study elucidates Merton’s creative interpretation of the New Testament texts that inform his powerful poetic homage to St. John. O’Connell’s agility recognizing Merton’s biblical allusions, and

understanding the implications of how he arranges and connects them, bears witness to his skill both as a theologian and as an expert interpreter of poetry. Through his sustained meditation on these poems O'Connell shows us that in St. John, even while still in the womb of Elizabeth, Merton finds a model for himself as "hidden in the very womb of the Church" yet prophetically pulsating throughout the body.

In a less formal, more lyrical reflection, **Monica Weis, SSJ** explores Merton's experience of awakening to the "*full meaning of lauds*" when the birds began to sing very early on that June morning in 1960.² This experience is the focus of Weis' probing piece "'With My Hair Almost on End': *Le Point Vierge* and the Dawn Birds." Weis invites us to appreciate the significance of this powerful experience, and to allow Merton's metaphors expressing it to entice us and dare us into a withdrawal in the hope of finding ourselves living together with Wisdom in the paradise of the present moment.

Robert Weldon Whalen brings us an enriching comparison of "Thomas Merton and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin" in terms of each one's insight into the "The Dawning of Divine Light"—as the subtitle reads. Whalen adeptly lifts up common readings of our perpetually dawning future offered by the poet and the paleontologist. He illustrates how both herald a new mysticism, firmly rooted in the past, "intensely incarnational and sacramental," yet broadened and deepened as it emerges within a new context of a religiously plural, scientific era, consciously accountable to whatever lies ahead.

Revelation asserts, of course, that this divine light perpetually dawns as the new creation awakening in the newly born because Sophia delights in the presence of children (Proverbs 8:31). **Fiona Gardner's** piece follows then with a reflection both broad and deep on "Thomas Merton and the Concept of the Child Mind: 'The Only One Worth Having.'" Centering her work on Merton's poem "Grace's House," which was inspired by a child's drawing, Gardner draws from a wide range of resources in her interpretation. In this insightful unpacking of Merton's poem, Gardner celebrates the only mind worth having, which far from being childish is nonetheless truly childlike in its simplicity, trust and unfettered imagination.

Returning to the bridge metaphor already encountered in Kaplan's

2. See Merton's journal entry of June 5, 1960 in Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 7; see also the opening pages of "Part Three: The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air" in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 117-18.

piece, **Mark Meade** offers “From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton’s Overlooked Bridge to Latin America and the World.” Meade introduces us to the fascinating person of Victoria who looks to be a kind of Argentinian counterpart to Fox’s portrait of Laughlin. Like J, Victoria opens Merton to new worlds. In this engaging and educational essay, Meade pieces together a portrait of their friendship from remaining fragments of their correspondence. It is a friendship between pilgrims who courageously and confidently bridge barriers of nationality, religious affiliation and political contexts to reclaim their shared humanity in their common search of God.

The tenth and final piece in this central series of articles is **Raymond Carr**’s theologically astute “Merton and Barth in Dialogue on Faith and Understanding: A Hermeneutics of Freedom and Ambiguity.” In his autobiographical introduction Carr recalls his first impressions of these intellectual giants from denominationally diverse worlds, and his own surprise at how similar they would prove to be. Carr then elucidates the quality of each one’s intellectual and spiritual humility which accounts for their receptivity to the word of God, and grounds their shared “theological hermeneutics.” Carr deftly argues that grace, and this resultant humility, frees both Merton and Barth from literalism and rationalism, permitting each to transcend the false dichotomy of faith and reason, and to be at home with the ambiguity of divine mystery.

Following these central pieces and serving as a segue into the review section of this journal, **David Joseph Belcastro** skillfully and lucidly reviews the world of Merton-related literature in 2012. To frame his review of a topically diverse landscape Belcastro relies on the compelling image “Thomas Merton, Escape Artist.” Delighting in the paradoxical image of the avowedly stable monk who is yet a kind of spiritual Houdini, Belcastro elucidates how we learn from Merton that the freedom of the children of God requires an escape. This is not an escape from reality or an *escapism* of obstinate refusal to accept things, but an escape from illusion and slavery *into* reality. So much of our continued fascination with Merton, evinced by publication after publication, has to do with our desire for the kind of freedom Merton obviously enjoyed, even amid the countless snares of our modern world. Belcastro’s piece celebrates Sophia’s call to escape these snares and to live together with her and with Tom in this transformative freedom.

And last, a word of gratitude: David and I wish to thank our editorial review board members for all of their help in producing this current volume. We especially thank Paul M. Pearson for his constant support and Patrick F. O’Connell for his patient and expert copyediting. And now, to you, happy reading.