

The Grandeur of God in a Picture of Hell

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God's Grandeur

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
Gerard Manley Hopkins¹

Introduction:

It will be one hundred years since Thomas Merton came into the world “under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain”;² and that world, “the picture of Hell” wrought with violence, bloodshed and tyranny, and preaching the false gospel of building, buying and technologically advancing our way out, stubbornly persists. It is no wonder that the temptation of a dualism that demonizes the world, the temptation of some gnostic trends, of the Cathars, seems as alluring today as a siren’s song. Even the early Merton wrestled with this temptation, sometimes imagining the world only as a prison to be escaped. Gradually, however, after giving up illusions of separateness and “supposed holiness,”³ he

1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner (Baltimore: Penguin, 1953) 27; subsequent references will be cited as “Hopkins” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3.

3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday,

found a richer and far more wondrous vision of the world redeemed – a vision of irrepressible hope and love – even for the world that we continue to make into a picture of hell.

We need this same prophetic vision today, for “without a vision, the people shall perish” (Proverbs 29:18). Merton offers this hopeful vision of a world redeemed, though he does not do so naively or simplistically; he does not ignore or gloss over the picture of hell we continue to paint – the world we make in our own fallen image. While at times he is prophetically polemical, Merton carries the torch he’d taken from his beloved Hopkins and bears a light of hope for this weary world “seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil.” This bold and radical vision of hope – seeing the world ever charged with the grandeur of God – continues to challenge, console and inspire. Reading through recently published books and articles, whether primarily or only peripherally about Thomas Merton, I was struck again and again by the persistence and power of this hopeful vision – one so beautiful and compelling we might just dare to believe it.⁴

Merton in Books

Christian contemplation includes not only the ascent to commune with God as transcendent, but also the descent which uncovers God’s immanence in the “dearest freshness deep down things.” It involves not only the turning of our hearts and minds *to* God, but also our turning to contemplate the world *with* God and the Cosmos in its totality. Douglas E. Christie’s book, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*,⁵ offers a breathtaking contemplation of nature, leaving the reader in the company of Hopkins, gaping in awe at the universe oozing God’s grandeur. Christie beautifully constructs this contemplative vision, drawing from the work of naturalists, romantics, poets, mystics and scientists, and the work succeeds so completely it may itself be considered a sacrament. Thomas Merton’s influence throughout this work is obvious, and he is explicitly noted on dozens of pages. Christie’s book has already received countless laudable and even effusive reviews, so let us hope it finds a vast and eager audience.

William J. Bausch’s *An Anthology of Saints* celebrates the beauty and

1966) 140.

4. I wish to thank my editorial intern, Carie Sanford, and Siena Heights University’s research librarian, Melissa Sissen, for their help in locating and obtaining many of the materials reviewed in this essay.

5. Douglas E. Christie, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

allure of sanctity in all of its myriad manifestations.⁶ The book is aimed at a popular audience and begins with portraits and vignettes of lives that exemplify “standards” of sanctity, such as Jesus of Nazareth and his mother Mary. It expands from there to various models of sanctity from the reclusive Desert Fathers to the fiery and bold St. Catherine of Siena. With these standards as a backdrop Bausch goes on to highlight more contemporary saints and some of the “unofficial and should-be saints” of our times. It is in this context that Thomas Merton, along with many others, receives focus. Bausch’s chapter on Merton (75-81) renders a simple biographical sketch and concludes with Merton’s famous prayer for the desire to do God’s will from *Thoughts in Solitude*. Bausch’s book is especially welcome in a culture obsessed with celebrity, and one that often valorizes vice as much as virtue. Bausch’s stories elicit laughter and tears, but mostly they evoke a yearning for personal holiness – the yearning so beautifully expressed in Merton’s prayer.

*The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order*⁷ is a substantive and scholarly guide to the history and charism of the White Monks. Through a series of topical articles, this collection traces the more than nine-hundred-year history and expansion of the Cistercian Order and explores many of its dimensions, including its constitutions, liturgy, architecture and preaching. The focus, however, favors the earlier stages of the Order’s growth and development – its formative years – so the latter part of this history gets only cursory attention. Bernard of Clairvaux is the only individual monk to be the subject of an essay, and there are two dedicated to him. Thomas Merton does get mentioned on occasion where he is acknowledged for the role he played as a magnet drawing more men to the cloister through his voluminous and popular writings, but no mention is made of his advocacy and influence regarding Cistercian reforms – an absence that seems odd in such an otherwise comprehensive guide. However, as one would expect from a Cambridge Companion, the articles are authored by the finest scholars of the tradition, the most familiar being Michael Casey, OCSO and Bernard McGinn, and they provide a wealth of information and valuable perspectives on this monastic tradition.

In *Popology: The Music of the Era in the Lives of Four Icons of the 1960s*,⁸ Timothy English explores the lives of the Kennedy brothers,

6. William J. Bausch, *An Anthology of Saints . . . Official, Unofficial, and Should-be Saints* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2012).

7. *The Cambridge Companion to the Cistercian Order*, edited by Mette Birkedal Bruun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8. Timothy English, *Popology: The Music of the Era in the Lives of Four Icons of the 1960s* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Publishing, 2013).

John F. and Robert, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thomas Merton through the lens of each one's musical tastes. Aside from containing interesting details, such as King's love of the tunes in the blockbuster film *The Sound of Music*, the book is especially enjoyable to read in this digital age when so many of the songs mentioned in it are readily available through mouse clicks or through touch pads on smart phones. Merton readers know well his love of jazz and Bob Dylan, but reading about his anguished love for M., then clicking on Joan Baez's "Silver Dagger" live in 1964 through YouTube, can make reading this book quite a powerful experience. Aside from reading his own words, listening to the songs Merton loved may be the best bridge to empathy we have, and English introduces a considerable list of Merton's favorites.

*Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern*⁹ is an ambitious introduction to over fifty thinkers representing the three great streams of Christian thought: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. With its almost eight hundred pages, the book covers an enormously diverse group of theologians and topics. The portraits are done with sharp editorial focus and give just enough to compel the reader to want to learn more from each of the featured thinkers. The piece on Merton by Henning Sandström highlights Merton's contributions in the areas of Christian-Buddhist dialogue and literary criticism, as well as his insights toward a theological aesthetics. Though voices from the continents of Asia and Africa are regrettably almost silent here, and only a few female theologians receive attention outside of Astri Hauge's fine essay on "Feminist Theology," this book is an excellent, ecumenical resource for much of what is happening in modern and postmodern theology.

Ori Z. Soltes' article "Universalism in the Thought of Rumi, Kabir, Abulafia, Luria and Merton; and the Implications for the Gülen Movement, Violence and Peace"¹⁰ is a pressingly relevant piece. Soltes surveys these religiously, temporally and geographically diverse mystics and highlights the paradoxical quality of each one's firm rootedness in his particular orthodoxy and his openness to the validity of other spiritual paths. These mystics, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu, demonstrate by their lives that the embrace of an authentic universalism does not require the abandonment of orthodox particularity; rather, it

9. *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern*, edited by Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

10. Ori Z. Soltes, "Universalism in the Thought of Rumi, Kabir, Abulafia, Luria and Merton; and the Implications for the Gülen Movement, Violence and Peace," *Preventing Violence and Achieving World Peace: The Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, edited by Ori Z. Soltes and Margaret A. Johnson (New York: Peter Lang, 2013) 115-36.

is the fruit of one's mystical submersion into the depths of one's own particular tradition. Soltes finds this same paradoxical quality embodied in the contemporary movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen. The Gülen movement, originating in Turkey but global now in its reach, is at once conservative and progressive. It promotes a vision of the Islamic State that starkly contrasts more exclusive and violently aggressive ones, and so is badly needed as an alternative today.

The bestseller, *Walk in Their Shoes: Can One Person Change the World?*¹¹ by Jim Ziolkowski and James S. Hirsch might just become for twenty-first-century American Catholics what *The Seven Storey Mountain* was for so many of the post-war era. The two books are similar as personal accounts of vocational journeys, but what makes them comparable is their capacity to inspire readers to live better, more deliberate and purposeful lives. Ziolkowski's book tells of his abandoning the fast track of corporate finance in favor of a life dedicated to the alleviation of poverty through education and service. Inspired by his travels to the world's most needy environments, Ziolkowski founded *Buildon.org*, an NGO that provides afterschool service programming for students in some of America's economically poorest areas and builds schools for children in developing countries. Jim's story is reminiscent also of Catherine Doherty's or Dorothy Day's in that it illustrates the powerful and enduring connection between faith, hope and love and reveals the power these virtues have to transform our world from a picture of hell into a beloved community. Award-winning journalist James Hirsch has helped Ziolkowski to shape this compelling and inspiring biographical narrative. In it, we learn that Jim's father first exposed him to Thomas Merton when Jim was very young, and Merton, along with Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama, continues to provide Jim with inspiration and spiritual guidance.

Journal Articles

Alejandro Bertolini and Cristina Viñuela explore four themes from the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Victoria Ocampo in their article "Victoria Ocampo – Thomas Merton: Diálogos y búsqueda de Dios entre el Norte y Sur de América."¹² Bertolini and Viñuela abstract the conversational topics of *The Center of the Soul*, *Sanctity*, *Freedom* and *Grace* from the Merton-Ocampo letters that beautifully illustrate

11. Jim Ziolkowski and James S. Hirsch, *Walk in Their Shoes: Can One Person Change the World?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013).

12. Alejandro Bertolini and Cristina Viñuela, "Victoria Ocampo – Thomas Merton: Diálogos y Búsqueda de Dios entre el Norte y Sur de América," *Jornadas Diálogos: Literatura, Estética y Teología* 5 (Septiembre, 2013) 1-8.

the interlocutors' shared search for the Divine between the continents of the Americas and help to highlight God's grandeur to which we are too often blind. This reflective piece nicely complements Mark Meade's more scholarly portrait of Merton's friendship with Ocampo, "From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton's Overlooked Bridge to Latin America."¹³

Nass Cannon explores the eschatological sixth essay from Thomas Merton's *Raids on the Unspeakable* in his work, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room . . . is the Time of . . . a New Creation . . . and Room for All."¹⁴ Cannon's reflection on this challenging essay is a jolting reminder of how timely and poignant Merton's prophetic vision remains. There is no doubt that the "Time of No Room" – the time of *Thanatos* – is our own dead end time! Yet by grace and the Incarnation, Christ clandestinely sneaks in, making something from nothing and finding room to redeem the world. Cannon along with Merton celebrates a supreme paradox; that in a world bereft of room for God, Christ makes room for all through the womb of the poor and powerless.

Cannon's work at once looks forward to the yet-to-be-realized and back to the already of the Bethlehem manger. It is an Advent reflection, so it calls to mind another article contemplating the same paradox that God makes room out of no room. Gary Hall's "A Flood Which Breaks the Dam: Seeking Advent Reflections in Merton's Private Journals"¹⁵ is a fascinating look at how the powerful and prophetic Word which overwhelms the walls we build is at once childlike and feminine. Hall looks at Merton's love affair and the consequences of its exposure as a kind of flood which breaks the dam of his "pseudo-wholeness" and leaves him happily broken "in several disedifying pieces."¹⁶ Hall's treatment here in no way tries to valorize nor to disparage this formative event; but he highlights what is surely a Christian hermeneutic of it, i.e. that "all things work together for the good of those who love God" (Romans 8:28).

Like Nass Cannon, Donald P. St. John also reflects on an essay from *Raids on the Unspeakable* in his article "Rain, Dusk, Solitude and Lis-

13. Mark Meade, "From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton's Overlooked Bridge to Latin America," *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013) 168-81.

14. Nass Cannon, "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room . . . is the Time of . . . a New Creation . . . and Room for All," *The Merton Journal* 20.1 (Eastertide 2013) 40-48.

15. Gary Hall, "A Flood Which Breaks the Dam: Seeking Advent Reflections in Merton's Private Journals," *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 3-10.

16. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 106.

tening: Thomas Merton's 'Rain and the Rhinoceros.'¹⁷ "Rain and the Rhinoceros" is one of Merton's most penetrating and sustained reflections on a world charged with the grandeur of God and yet inhabited by a rhinoceros-like human herd increasingly oblivious to the majestic and utterly useless beauty which flashes and oozes, as Merton writes, "when the rain wanders freely among the hills and forests."¹⁸ Drawing on insights from Merton, from the poetry of Mary Oliver and from Jon Kabat-Zinn, St. John's essay calls us to the contemplative listening in the rain and in the darkness that recovers our seamless embedding in nature, softening our rhinoceros hides and helping us become human persons fully alive.

John McLuckie echoes the same theme in his essay "This Unspeakable Paradise – Thomas Merton and the Forest."¹⁹ Instead of rain and darkness, it is the forest and Merton's love for "the woods around Gethsemani" (14) that McLuckie thoughtfully explores as a gateway to a vision of the world where the picture of hell dissolves and gives way to "an all-sufficient exclamation of silence and an unspeakable paradise" (16).

Fiona Gardner offers a penetrating and provocative examination of the question of what mental and spiritual health should look like in her essay, "Towards an Understanding of Thomas Merton's Ideas on Sanity and Spiritual Sanity."²⁰ After considering the frightening ways sanity can be construed as obedience and conformity to superstructures that reflect our grossest madness, and morality reduced to mechanical efficiency and technical expediency, Gardner offers a corrective. Following Merton's insight that "sanity can have no meaning where spiritual values have lost their relevance" (15) – values such as empathy and compassion, Gardner elucidates what spiritual sanity entails in hopes that it can inform and critique secular notions of sanity which by themselves remain so vulnerable to corruption and exploitation. Gardner argues that spiritual sanity, which is cultivated by contemplative practice, is marked by humble authenticity, by awareness of our radical interdependence, and by the capacity to glimpse paradoxical reality beyond dualisms and harsh dichotomies. These characteristics guard against un-self-critical moral certitude and the hellish "sanity" of an Adolf Eichmann and of Auschwitz.

Some disaffected youth, even from North America, are regrettably

17. Donald P. St. John, "Rain, Dusk, Solitude and Listening: Thomas Merton's 'Rain and the Rhinoceros,'" *Ecospirit*, 7.3 (2013) 4-8.

18. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 15.

19. John McLuckie, "This Unspeakable Paradise – Thomas Merton and the Forest," *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 11-17.

20. Fiona Gardner, "Towards an Understanding of Thomas Merton's Ideas on Sanity and Spiritual Sanity," *The Merton Journal* 20.1 (Easter tide, 2013) 14-21.

drawn to the hellish kind of sanity, the sanity that Merton describes as the sanity of the terrorist – “the isolated individual, and the small group, enabled by revolutionary charisma to defy all the technological might of the biggest powers in the world.”²¹ We witnessed this most horrendously when two young brothers, one perceived as a normal American kid, dropped knapsack bombs in crowds watching the Boston Marathon. Merton scholar and Franciscan priest Daniel Horan responded to this tragic event by daring to share his vision of it in his piece, “The Unspeakable: The Boston Marathon and the beginning of Christian hope.”²² Drawing much inspiration from Merton, Horan looks unflinchingly at this picture of hell and warns us to resist the blaming and the scapegoating, the accusing that is the purview of Satan, and challenges us to see that Christian hope enables us to look into the void of the unspeakable “and realize that we can do something about violence in our world and live a different way” (25). But there won’t be any forward movement, Horan suggests, until our collective complicity is admitted “in what we have done and what we have failed to do” (25). This co-responsibility requires humility and a willingness to change.

This need for humility and a willingness to change is applied to the ecclesiological context in Christopher Pramuk’s brilliant essay, “Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice.”²³ With theological sophistication and a deep compassion, Pramuk, ever evincing the influence of Merton, offers new ways of imagining differences of race, gender and sexual orientation. He imagines a vision capable of discovering Christ “where we might be least prepared to meet Him” (42) – in the Muslim, the gay couple, the divorced couple, the atheist, or even “the priest behind the altar” (42) for those wounded by the pedophilia scandal. His vision is even more inclusive and affirmative than the one emerging from the recent synod where some of these issues were being discussed. Perhaps when issues of “the family” are revisited again a year from now some of the bishops will have read Pramuk’s piece, and will have embraced this enormously generous vision of Christ who, as Hopkins has written, “plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his” (“As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” ll. 12-13 [Hopkins 51]).

21. “War and the Crisis of Language,” in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 314.

22. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “The Unspeakable: The Boston Marathon and the Beginning of Christian Hope,” *America* 208.17 (20 May 2013) 23-25.

23. Christopher Pramuk, “Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice,” *New Theology Review: A Catholic Journal of Theology and Ministry* 26.1 (September 2013) 42-54.

“The Trappist Monk and Pasternak’s Tree”²⁴ is Kathleen Tarr’s personal homage to two artists she came to admire independently of one another. In her engaging reminiscence, Tarr recounts how as a child she had seen the film *Dr. Zhivago* and though she was captivated by its beauty and its power to humanize a people she had written off as cogs in a Red machine, its theological subtleties and socio-political commentary would remain beyond her for many years. She came to Merton much later in life because of a spiritual hunger and a yearning for contemplation but was fascinated to discover his friendship with Pasternak. This is a thoughtful reflection that honors the memory of two artists whose resistance to various tyrannies continues to inspire and to build the reign of love.

Merton’s friend and fellow pilgrim, Daniel Berrigan, SJ, will certainly be remembered first and foremost as the radical priest jailed for his involvement with the Catonsville Nine – who used homemade napalm to destroy draft board records in protest against the war in Vietnam. Patricia Schnapp, however, in her essay “Dan Berrigan’s Lyrical Memoir,”²⁵ reminds us that Berrigan is “above all, a superb poet” (50). Highlighting and interpreting Berrigan’s poems spanning several decades, Schnapp reveals how his poetry “echoes the trajectory of his life” (51), revealing the interior and spiritual depths of this public and political priest. Schnapp also recalls how Berrigan considered his friendship with Merton to be “precious” even though Merton was critical of the Catonsville action. Though Merton considered Berrigan’s action to approximate too closely the violence against which he stood in protest, Berrigan shared with him and with his fellow Jesuit, Gerard Manley Hopkins, that same sacramental vision of God’s grandeur in a picture of hell. Schnapp writes: “Berrigan’s poetic voice . . . encompasses both his absorption with the beauty of the world and his revulsion at the horrors some people have done to others in it” (58), and she selectively lifts poems and passages that make this clear.

The contemplative coincidence of opposites, of the world as paradise and as a picture of hell, is brought to light most poignantly in Patrick O’Connell’s “Overlooking America: ‘Day Six O’Hare Telephane’ and the Landscape of Lograire.”²⁶ O’Connell interprets this opening to the final “West” canto in *The Geography of Lograire* in light of Merton’s lived experiences, readings and journal entries that are the seeds for it. By doing

24. Kathleen Tarr, “The Trappist Monk and Pasternak’s Tree,” *Sewanee Review* 121.3 (Summer 2013) 449-59.

25. Patricia Schnapp, “Dan Berrigan’s Lyrical Memoir,” *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 50-60.

26. Patrick F. O’Connell, “Overlooking America: ‘Day Six O’Hare Telephane’ and the Landscape of Lograire,” *The Merton Journal* 20.1 (Eastertide 2013) 25-34.

so, O'Connell expertly decodes what can easily and otherwise remain a series of impenetrable allusions. O'Connell guides the reader to see the layered world Merton is imagining, from the superficial economic and militaristic conquest of the secular (in most of the earlier lines), to the secret center of the sacred and the sacramental (ll. 115-25), and prophetically back to the former, humorously disillusioned by its persistence (31). O'Connell makes it clear, however, that the lines revealing the sacred Christ-centered world (ll. 122-25) are "literally and figuratively" the pinnacle of the entire work – "an expression of profound compassion, of sharing the experience of all humanity, making the suffering of others one's own as Christ himself identified with human brokenness and healed it by taking it upon himself" (30).

The contemplative embraces both terms of a paradox simultaneously, the sinner who is saved, the human who is divine, the one God who is three Persons, and the world as a picture of hell and as a sacrament. The "either/or" of a disincarnate angelism²⁷ on the one hand and a hopeless materialism on the other gets us nowhere. It leads either to the cul-de-sac of fantasy, illusion and denial, or to the cul-de-sac of violence, exploitation and ruin – and perhaps they are one and the same cul-de-sac. Thomas Merton, along with so many whom he has influenced, continues to declare, "The suspension of modern life in contemplation that *gets you somewhere!*"²⁸ Contemplation unveils the sacramental vision of a world being mysteriously created and redeemed, even while we are still sinners, and opens us to the irrevocable invitation to come to the banquet, the dance and the wedding feast with all our wounds and clothed in "our rags of light."²⁹

27. This term is used by Walker Percy in his comedic novel *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1971) to describe a modern kind of spiritual sickness that denies the value of nature and the bodily.

28. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 29.

29. Leonard Cohen's song "If It Be Your Will" ends with the prayer: "And draw us near / And bind us tight / All your children here / In their rags of light / In our rags of light / All dressed to kill / And end this night / If it be your will."