

Introduction: Thin Places and Thick Descriptions

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Hawk. First the shadow flying downward along the wall of sunlit foliage. Then the bird itself, trim, compact substance, in the sky overhead, quite distinct from woods and trees, flying in freedom. Barred tail, speckled wings, with sunlight shining through them. He cut a half circle in emptiness over the elm. Then he seemed to put his hands in his pockets and sped, without a wing beat, like a bullet, to plunge into the grove across the open field.

Thomas Merton¹

Where there is a lot of fuss about “spirituality,” “enlightenment” or just “turning on” it is often because there are buzzards hovering around a corpse. . . . Zen enriches no one. There is no body to be found. The birds may come and circle for a while in the place where it is thought to be. But they soon go elsewhere. When they are gone, the “nothing,” the “no-body” that was there, suddenly appears. . . . It was there all the time but the scavengers missed it, because it was not their kind of prey.

Thomas Merton²

Introduction

A few years ago, Eric Weiner published a travel piece in *The New York Times* about “thin places” – where the usually thick distance between heaven and earth, the particular and the universal, thins out or even dissolves.³ He was using an old Celtic concept of thin places to write about potential pilgrimage destinations – some expected, like St. Peter’s Basilica and the Blue Mosque, but others not so, like an obscure bar in Tokyo and a trendy bookstore in Portland. He ended with an answer to his own provocative question:

If God is everywhere and “everywhen,” as the Australian aboriginals put it so wonderfully, then why are some places thin and others not?

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 224.

2. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) ix.

3. Eric Weiner, “Thin Places, Where We Are Jolted Out of Old Ways of Seeing the World,” *The New York Times* (11 March 2012); available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>.

Why isn't the whole world thin? Maybe it is, but we are too thick to recognize it. Maybe thin places offer glimpses not of heaven but of earth as it really is, unencumbered. Unmasked.

Thomas Merton mindfully inhabited an exceptionally thin world. He seemed especially attuned to the omnipresence of the normally imperceptible. However common this aesthetic sensibility may in fact be in the general population, the gift for communicating it is rare. Merton unquestionably had that gift. He wrote with what Flannery O'Connor would likely describe as the "Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete."⁴ His thick descriptions of particular places and moments narrow the distance between heaven and earth, or perhaps simply unmask a once hidden but always present wholeness.

Clifford Geertz, an iconic American intellectual, popularized the term "thick description" in reference to an anthropologist's aim. Geertz described the science of anthropology not as an experimental one in search of a law, but as an interpretive one in search of meaning.⁵ He argued that thick descriptions, rich in meaning, do not come from the disconnected, aloof and disinterested observer. They require participation and getting dirty. One who is attentively embedded and involved in a context can mediate a meaningful interpretation, or render the thick description. In a similar way, Merton had seen his own task as a contemplative in search of meaning not merely as an experiential one, but also as an interpretive one. Through his interpretations of his own experiences, he enabled many of his readers to "co-experience God," as Dermot Lane says, "not so much as something seen in the world but as the basis of all seeing . . . not as a being before us but as the source of all beings, not as a particular meaning but as the ultimate context in which all meanings subsist."⁶ In this way, "thick descriptions" of the spiritual awakenings that can be occasioned by attentiveness to the most common things serve to penetrate our ordinarily thick skulls and unmask for us what Merton calls "the hidden ground of Love."⁷

4. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969) 202.

5. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 3-30.

6. Dermot A. Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981) 19.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 115.

Volume 29

Thanks to the intentional vision of David Belcastro,⁸ many of the featured essays that comprise volume 29 of *The Merton Annual* are intensely concerned with physical places and spaces, domestic and wild. For example, **Paul M. Pearson**'s "From Clairvaux to Mount Olivet: Thomas Merton's Geography of Place" reveals how Merton's understanding of the relationship between physical landscapes and personal identities, which he inherited from his parents, stayed with him and deepened over the years. Even though Merton briefly but mistakenly thought of his arrival at the monastery as a kind of end to his geographical journey, Pearson shows how Merton reawakened to the importance of such when he was writing *The Sign of Jonas* and how geography and place continued from then on to shape his self-understanding.

The piece that follows Pearson's, "'This Terrific Sense of Geography': Spatial Thinking in Merton's Journals" by **Kathleen M. Baker**, provides a second example. Baker, herself a poet and professor of geography, draws on some recent research in cognitive science and renders a concise and thought-provoking exploration of how Merton thought in spatial modes and how that kind of thinking contributed to his tremendous capacity for insight and his remarkable memory evinced in his journal writings.

Following Baker, **Jason M. Brown** continues the geographical theme in his piece "Thomas Merton, Wildness and the Sacramental Power of Place." By relying on Merton, but also on the work of Monica Weis, John Muir and William Cronon, Brown encourages a shift away from our current paradigm that bifurcates the world into "wild places" and domesticated ones – the former cordoned off while the latter get developed and exploited – toward a more sustainable and integrated view that does not oppose culture to nature. Brown finds in Merton's writings a model for how we might be able to appreciate not only the sacramental power of wild places but also "the wildness in the places we call home."

One of the more significant places in Merton's life, and one he nearly made a home, is a northern neighborhood of Manhattan known for its music and literature and its degrading poverty. Merton first loved Har-

8. David Belcastro retired from his post as co-editor of *The Merton Annual* after the publication of volume 28 but he played a significant role in setting the articles for volume 29. I am grateful to David for his many years of service to this publication and for his mentoring of me. I look forward to working with Deborah Kehoe, the newly appointed co-editor of *The Merton Annual*, on future volumes. As always, I am grateful to Patrick F. O'Connell and to Paul M. Pearson for their invaluable help in preparing this publication.

lem for its romantic allure, but then for all its wounds and ugliness. In “The Persistence of Harlem in the Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton,” **Michael N. McGregor** shows how impactful “a handful of nights” in Harlem would be for a rich white kid in shaping his sense of the gospel call to the works of mercy and voluntary poverty. Regarding Merton’s volunteer work in Harlem, and with his own gift for “thick description,” McGregor writes that “it wasn’t until Merton touched those dresses, felt the dirt from those shoes, and saw the people his sorting efforts were helping, that he understood at a deeper level – the level of empathy and compassion – what actual poverty and degradation were like; the unsentimental conditions of daily life in Harlem.”

Harlem had its attractions for the young Merton, but so did Gethsemani. He was torn a bit between his call to cloistered living, where vowed poverty would mean little more than that his preference for Christ would not be challenged by the presence of too much wine and too many flesh-and-blood women, and his desire to live the gospel in the messiness of actual poverty, where hungry and needy people might draw more on his *caritas* but also on his *cupiditas*. Gethsemani of course won the struggle and turned out to be Merton’s most enduring earthly home. The next piece in this volume focuses on Merton’s arrival and his most immediate response to the place itself through the lens of some early poems. In “Trappists, Working – Trappists, Praying: The Earliest Monastic Poetry of Thomas Merton,” **Patrick F. O’Connell** explores poems that give some sense of “the disjunctions and continuities between the life within and beyond the monastery walls, between the world he had left behind and the world he had chosen, or for which he had been mysteriously chosen.”

Keeping with a focus on poetry, we move from Merton’s early compositions dating from the time of his entrance into the monastery, to his own later interest in the poetry of early Irish hermits. **Monica Weis, SSJ** recently released a book exploring Thomas Merton’s interest in Celtic spirituality more broadly, in which she also touches on the concept of “thin places.”⁹ Her article here, entitled “Was Thomas Merton Merely Dabbling in Early Irish Poetry?” is a condensed and significantly reworked chapter from that new book.¹⁰ Through an examination of a mimeographed anthology of Merton’s favorite early Irish poetry, Weis explores various dimensions of the Celtic world view, including the view that “kinship with

9. Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton and the Celts: A New World Opening Up* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016) 70-71.

10. This is a reworking of chapter five, “Contemporary Welsh Poetry and Early Irish Hermit Poetry” (83-107).

nature is an act of praise.” Her work reveals the vivid parallels between Merton’s mysticism and that of the early Irish hermit poets. She finds in the Irish poetry, and in Merton’s own, an attentiveness to and validation of nature as such, as unmasked.

Perhaps nowhere is Merton’s attentiveness to the holiness of ordinary things more pronounced than in his essay *Day of a Stranger*, which is the focus of the next article. **Michael Plekon**’s “‘What I Wear Is Pants. What I Do Is Live. How I Pray Is Breathe’ – Merton and the Spiritual Life in the Twenty-First Century” is an insightful exploration of Merton’s “daily liturgy of living” with all of his mundane chores – like scrubbing the coffee pot and spraying for insects – that somehow rise to the level of religious ritual simply by his living mindfully. Through the prism of the thickly descriptive *Day of a Stranger* Plekon focuses on the hermitage as a place so thin that the category of “spiritual life” as a separate kind of thing becomes almost silly. Since Merton was mindful of the holy even as race riots raged and metallic birds with explosive eggs flew overhead, Plekon shows him to be a fit exemplar for seekers in our present century which is turning out to be no less fraught.

The article that follows Plekon’s is connected to those explosive eggs that hid in the breasts of those giant metallic birds. In his essay “Public Intellectual, Democratic Dissenter: Thomas Merton on Nuclear Weapons,” **Donald Grayston** considers important dimensions of Merton’s social critique. In his piece, Grayston partially reconstructs the context of American Catholicism in the nineteen sixties, when the election of John F. Kennedy spawned a kind of flowering of Catholic culture in America, but not a monolithic one. Grayston describes Merton’s position in that emerging landscape as one of a prophetic intellectual disturbing the general public and nationalistic Catholics, be they ecclesiastical authorities or run-of-the-mill parishioners. Grayston’s recalling of Merton’s social analysis is eerily timely given the precarious nature of the Iran nuclear deal and the president-elect’s belief that nuclear proliferation is both inevitable and good.¹¹

Grayston’s article is followed by one that recalls some familiarly thin places in Merton’s life as well as some of those in the life of his friend and correspondent Henry Miller. In his piece “Thomas Merton and Henry Miller: A Correspondence in Vision,” **Angus F. Stuart** describes

11. See Gene Gerzhoy and Nick Miller, “Donald Trump thinks more countries should have nuclear weapons. Here’s what the research says,” *The Washington Post* (6 April 2016); available online at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/04/06/should-more-countries-have-nuclear-weapons-donald-trump-thinks-so/?utm_term=.23ccf25a9cc6.

the similarities between these two literary giants of the twentieth century from their physical reciprocal resemblance to their spiritual awakenings. Stuart's piece provides glimpses into Merton's epiphany on the streets of Louisville as it compares with Miller's awakening through the streets of Maroussi in Greece. The corner of Fourth and Walnut helped reveal to Merton the illusory nature of his "supposed holiness" while Greece opened Miller's eyes to his own pride and arrogance – the pride of "a city man" living a "false and restricted life." Whether he is describing Merton resembling an ex-con hiding in the woods of Kentucky, or Miller as a secular monk tucked into the coastal mountains of Big Sur, California, Stuart cleverly conveys numerous points of convergence between these friends whose lives on the surface can appear worlds apart.

Reconciling what is apparently disparate is a theme that carries into the next piece by **Anthony E. Clark**. "Finding Our Way: Thomas Merton, John Wu and the Christian Dialogue with Early China" is a fascinating exploration of Merton's and Wu's shared interest in Daoism and Zen Buddhism. In this article Clark skillfully elucidates how both Merton and Wu delighted in the profound consonance each discovered in the voices of the Christian desert fathers and mothers and those of the early Daoist masters. That consonance – the voice of Wisdom – called Merton and Wu out of the dusty haze of worldly snares into the clarity and freedom of solitude and peace.

However, the wisdom in those voices is not merely preserved on printed pages or in digital files but lives in contemplative communities and speaks through wise teachers. **Padraic O'Hare**'s article "Young Adult Spiritual Lives: Merton, Moran and Monastic Resources" explores the importance of "contemplation education" which is a kind of pedagogy that goes well beyond the dissemination of information and imparts or engenders genuine meaning and purpose. O'Hare elucidates a contemplative vision of education by drawing on teachers such as Raimundo Panikkar, Gabriel Moran, Michael Casey, Joan Chittister, Rowan Williams and Thomas Merton and examines the effect of such an education on a group of young adults who experience it through participation in a particular Benedictine community.

The Merton Annual normally includes interviews and previously unpublished original material from Thomas Merton, as well as a bibliographic review essay, and volume 29 is no exception. The articles discussed above are preceded in this volume by a couple of introductory pieces and concluded with a bibliographic review of 2015. The first piece that appears in the present volume then is "A Quite Exceptional Convent": The Regina Laudis Correspondence," introduced and edited by **Patrick**

F. O’Connell. With the permission of the abbess and the surviving nuns of Regina Laudis Abbey who had exchanged letters with Thomas Merton, all the extant correspondence between Merton and the Regina Laudis sisters is now made available, testifying to the mutual regard of Merton and members of this community, and to a love for the Shakers which he shared with these remarkable Benedictine nuns. The following piece is an interview with hermit and ecologist **Charles Brandt** entitled “A Single Sacred Community,” which was co-conducted by **Donald Grayston** and **David Chang**. Brandt named his hermitage, located in Black Creek on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, “Merton House”; it is a place the Celts would surely consider exceptionally thin. This fascinating three-way conversation reveals some kindred spirits whose experiences and interests intersect in a variety of ways.

The final piece that follows the scholarly articles and introduces the review section of this volume is **Joseph Raab’s** “Relevance and Ambivalence: A Bibliographic Review of Thomas Merton’s Centenary (2015).” This survey highlights a wide variety of publications that appeared in the centenary of Merton’s birth in the world of Merton studies and in the increasing number of fields that are finding him relevant in the twenty-first century. Merton’s status as a classic, it is suggested, is secure, but that only means that he will continue to delight and disturb, prompting an ambivalent response – one of gratitude for Merton as a spiritual guide, yet one of frustration that the ills and injustices that evoke Merton’s prophetic voice stubbornly persist.

Conclusion

Merton can be described as a master of thick description and one adept at recognizing thin places; but what about the rest of us for whom, of late, places have seemed thick and descriptions very thin? In Merton’s rural Kentucky the barren farmlands have become fields of slogans. Scraped earth has sprouted a bumper crop of bold Trump banners, petitioning to “Make America Great Again” and to “Lock Her Up!” It’s a new kind of angry monoculture with the occasional rare exception of a “Stronger Together” sign standing out like a defiant weed. Political doublespeak, tawdry tweets and conspiracy theories hardly veil our basest fears and desires. The thinnest descriptions of life’s meaning and the crudest assessments of its purpose and value populate the Instagram, Twitter and Facebook feeds, and even the old-fashioned airwaves. Language is ever in crisis. The insubstantial rhetoric and the thin slogans make it harder for us to remove, let alone see through, our thickly biased lenses to the hidden ground of love. But herein lies some consolation. Faith assures that

whatever cruelties we foist upon one another, Sophia will not be made a prisoner. She continues to play in creation. Let us hope that the essays that follow help to unmask for us the world's thinness and reveal that eternal dance, the hidden wholeness that cannot be directly seen, or touched, or put in a genus, or distinguished by a difference, yet is present.¹²

12. I'm paraphrasing Bernard Lonergan, who in his book *Topics in Education* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) described the world as "a cipher, a revelation, an unveiling the presence of one who is not seen, touched, grasped, put in a genus, distinguished by a difference, yet is present" (222).