

Thomas Merton in Connivance with Eternity: A 2018 Bibliographic Overview

Deborah Pope Kehoe

Across the evening sky, all the birds are leaving. But how can they know
it's time for them to go? Before the winter fire, I will still be dreaming.
I have no thought of time. For who knows where the time goes?

Sandy Denny¹

When I read my departed friends, I have an uncanny sensation that
they are in the room.

Harold Bloom²

Introduction

Observing milestones in one another's journey along our common path from womb to tomb is a longstanding custom in human societies. Indeed, in today's world, fueled by the engines of commercialism and social media that manufacture special occasions (e.g. "Facebook Friendversaries"), marking time has become an exercise in perpetual revelry, a mania for celebrating the movement of our planet, not always mindful of the ironic implications, as expressed in Dylan Thomas's "Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight, / And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way."³

Nevertheless, certain anniversaries do merit distinction. The fiftieth, for example, is exalted as "golden" because it celebrates the accomplishment on the part of individuals or institutions of having sustained their integrity or fidelity for a remarkable number of years within the average human lifespan. Nor do these recognitions end with an earthly death. The golden anniversary of an influential person's entrance into eternity gives us a new opportunity to confirm the vitality of that person's legacy. This bibliographical overview arises from such an opportunity.

1. Sandy Denny, "Who Knows Where the Time Goes?" *Unhalfbricking* (London: Olympic Recording Studios, 1969).

2. Harold Bloom, *Possessed by Memory* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2019) xix; subsequent references will be cited as "Bloom" parenthetically in the text.

3. Dylan Thomas, "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (ll. 10-11), *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York: New Directions, 1971) 207.

A Brief Discursion on Time

The date on a calendar only begins to tell the story of time in the human condition. Its mysteries have occupied the minds of philosophers, theologians, scientists and artists probably since we first conceived of time as a measurable entity and became conscious of the impulse to ponder its parameters. Not surprisingly, Thomas Merton, contemplative monk, social critic, poet and literary analyst, has written insightfully on this enigmatic phenomenon. Some examples include his poem “The Legacy of Herakleitos,”⁴ in which the speaker assumes the voice of the Ionian philosopher delivering proverbs. For instance, the oft-repeated maxim, “You cannot step twice into the same stream; / for fresh waters are ever flowing upon you” (*BT* 101), implicitly promises that the constancy of change also carries with it what Wordsworth calls “abundant recompense”⁵ for the losses wrought by the rapids of time.

A second example of Merton’s grasp of time’s complexities, “Atlas and the Fatman,”⁶ an allegorical prose poem telling a story of two contrasting ways of dwelling in the temporal realm, reveals Merton’s sensitivity to the relationship between time and nature. Atlas, a mountain in northern Africa and mythological bearer of the world, is personified as a “high silent man of lava, with feet in the green surf, watching the stream of days and years!” (*BT* 24; *RU* 91). Atlas represents a life of harmony with the currents of the cosmos, as opposed to the way of the Fatman (significantly, the name of the second atomic bomb dropped on Japan), described as one who “thought . . . he could stop everything from moving” and “swore at the top of his voice” (*BT* 31; *RU* 95). The Fatman portrays the forces of technology and violence that exploit nature for unnatural ends; his existence is a constant, ultimately doomed, race against the clock.

Merton’s spiritual perspectives on time are found in *Seasons of Celebration*.⁷ In these writings about the liturgical calendar, Merton affirms Earth’s yearly orbit around the sun as “the rhythm of natural life” (*SC*

4. Thomas Merton, “The Legacy of Herakleitos,” *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 95-106; subsequent references will be cited as “*BT*” parenthetically in the text.

5. William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798” (l. 88), *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967) 209.

6. Thomas Merton, “Atlas and the Fatman,” *BT* 24-48; Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 91-107; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965) 45-60; subsequent references will be cited as “*SC*” parenthetically in the text.

49) but also notes that for unredeemed humanity, that perennial journey becomes a trap, a “wheel of time” (*SC* 49) cycling each generation “inexorably” toward death (*SC* 50) unless we empty ourselves before the love of Christ, who has “laid hold upon time” (*SC* 49) and through the sacraments, gives access to eternity.

Finally, Merton’s critique of William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury*⁸ tells of a mystical view of time. Here, Merton combines his literary expertise with his spiritual wisdom to analyze the character of Dilsey, the aged African-American servant in the troubled Compson family household. Merton sees Dilsey as embodying liberation from the futility of linear time, a kind of freedom open to the one who accepts the sacramental invitation. Merton calls her a perfect example of Christian identity, “identity as response” (*LE* 504), and asserts that she models Faulkner’s “Biblical sense of time” (*LE* 499), which may be defined as innate synchronization with the cosmic dance, as well as the gift of prophecy. When Dilsey, fresh from having heard the Easter sermon preached by Reverend Shegog, says, “I seed de beginning, en now I sees de endin” (*LE* 512), she not only bears witness to the natural sequence of her life, she also envisions its transcendence beyond time, perceiving the *hereafter* in the *now*.

To my mind, the preceding digression gives an illuminating backdrop to the following overview of Merton-related publications that appeared in 2018, commemorating – by design or by coincidence – the fiftieth anniversary of his death. Merton’s imaginative message of faith in the immanent immutability within the cyclic rhythms of the natural world and his understanding that time is more a matter of quality than quantity enrich this bibliographic display of his vital existence even half a century after his death, an outpouring of writing that confirms for us once again that his is a voice both timely and timeless.

The works of 2018 are numerous and diverse. This plentitude calls for celebration, but it also discourages exhaustive treatment and requires an organizing principle to expedite its navigation. Prompted by the significance of the time of their publication, a golden point on the continuum of Merton’s existence, I have placed the materials in this essay into two broad and permeable sections: “Merton Past” and “Merton Eternally Present.”

8. Thomas Merton, “Time and Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*,” in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 497-514; subsequent references will be cited as “*LE*” parenthetically in the text.

Merton Past

Many of these publications view Merton through the lenses of nostalgia, academic scrutiny or journalistic investigation as they focus on relationships, experiences and circumstances of Merton's bodily existence between 1915 and 1968.

A number of books center on, or were written by, individuals with whom Merton was associated at various points in his lifetime. For example, Robert Bonazzi's *Reluctant Activist: The Spiritual Life and Art of John Howard Griffin*,⁹ as its title notes, is not a comprehensive biography of Griffin, but one that highlights his life and work as a creative and courageous advocate for racial justice and a man of deep Christian faith. Many devotees know Griffin as the one who assisted Merton in becoming a skilled photographer, who collected and wrote the text for a volume of Merton's photographs¹⁰ and who accepted the project of writing Merton's first official biography.¹¹ Bonazzi's study reveals, mostly implicitly, that Griffin and Merton shared other traits, including the ability to do prodigious amounts of work while coping with physical ailments – in Griffin's case, an excruciating level of pain in his final years – as well as a common struggle to reconcile many competing vocations within a single lifetime: for Griffin, those of family man, writer, social activist and un-cloistered contemplative. Understandably, much of the book passes with scarce mention of Merton, yet Bonazzi tactically inserts quotations from works by and about Merton, drawing considerably from Griffin's journals, such as the hermitage journals¹² that he kept during his several stays at Gethsemani after Merton's death while he was researching the biography that he would never finish.

Other books about persons with whom Merton was once affiliated include Kathy Petersen Cecala's *Called to Serve: The Untold Story of Father Irenaeus Herscher, OFM*,¹³ in which the author, recalling in adula-

9. Robert Bonazzi, *Reluctant Activist: The Spiritual Life and Art of John Howard Griffin* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2018).

10. See John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970).

11. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Griffin's failing health compelled him to resign before he was able to complete a comprehensive biography.

12. John Howard Griffin, *The Hermitage Journals: A Journal Kept While Working on the Biography of Thomas Merton*, ed. Conger Beasley, Jr. (Kansas City, MO: Andrews and McMeel, 1981).

13. Kathy Petersen Cecala, *Called to Serve: The Untold Story of Father Irenaeus Herscher, OFM* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018); for a more

tory tones her own personal connection with her subject when she was a student at what was then called St. Bonaventure's College, puts together a concise biography of Father Irenaeus, librarian at St. Bonaventure from 1937 to 1970. Cecala explains that her purpose is to show Father Irenaeus as one of the influential figures in Merton's life during his "Saint Bonaventure years" (1940-1941). She quotes from *The Seven Storey Mountain* to capture Merton's admiration for the good-natured librarian: "always . . . surprised and glad to see everybody,"¹⁴ who, upon their first meeting, mistook Merton's name for "Myrtle" and who, after Merton's death, played a significant role in establishing and maintaining the Merton Archives in the Friedsam Memorial Library at St. Bonaventure.

Similar to Cecala's book, in that it also centers on a fellow cleric in Merton's life, at a different period and for a longer duration, is Louis A. Ruprecht's *An Elemental Life: Mystery and Mercy in the Work of Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO 1915-2011*.¹⁵ Rather than render a conventional account of the life of Father Kelty, Ruprecht prefers to analyze his personality, particularly in comparison and contrast with that of Merton, whom Kelty served as secretary at Gethsemani, where their monastic relationship had elements of tension. The author aims for character revelation by heavily quoting Kelty's anecdotes and reflections on his experiences living and working with Thomas Merton – yet not always with pellucid effect.

Another retrospective on Merton's interactions with members of his monastic community is Paul Quenon's *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir*,¹⁶ which relates how Merton's physical presence and eventual disappearance made lasting impressions on the author, well known to regular Merton conference participants as a former novice of Merton's. With imagistic wit – like Father Louis, Brother Paul is a poet – he dedicates two chapters, "Thomas Merton, Novice Master" (23-40) and "Merton's Death as Seen from the Home Grounds" (109-18), to evoking the stature of Merton as a formative figure in Quenon's "useless" life.

Working from a unique angle is Robert Hudson's book *The Monk's*

thorough review, see Thomas Spencer, "One of 'Tom's Guardian Angels,'" *The Merton Seasonal* 44.4 (Winter 2019) 31-33.

14. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 239.

15. Louis A. Ruprecht, *An Elemental Life: Mystery and Mercy in the Work of Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO 1915-2011* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2018); for a more thorough review, see Monica Weis, SSJ, "Prodigious Ponderer," *The Merton Seasonal* 44.3 (Fall 2019) 28-29.

16. Paul Quenon, OCSO, *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018); for a more thorough review, see Gregory K. Hillis, "Witness to Freedom," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.3 (Fall 2018) 26-28.

Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966.¹⁷ The cover notice of a Foreword by David Dalton, founding editor of *Rolling Stone* magazine, indicates a different kind of Merton study and witnesses to his transcultural appeal. Hudson arranges his book according to a three-segment timeline based on the dates of Merton's first contact with and final departure from the Abbey of Gethsemani: April 1941 to October 1968. Per the subtitle, the summer of 1966 receives special focus, as the period of Merton's ecstatic, agonizing and dangerous relationship with M. Hudson concludes each division with what he calls a *Dylan Interlude*. In a nutshell, the author intends to demonstrate how two cultural icons at one tempestuous point in history simultaneously experienced personal turbulence, while the creative genius of one supplied salutary inspiration for the other. For an in-depth evaluation of Hudson's book, see the discussion by Patrick F. O'Connell in the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual*.

Apropos of its solemn significance, the year 2018 saw Merton studies increase with publications that move headlong into questions raised by the standard account of Merton's death. Two examples are *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*¹⁸ and *Thomas Merton Meets the Unspeakable: Rendezvous in Thailand*.¹⁹ Both works reject the official statement that Merton's cause of death was accidental electrocution. Instead, they submit that Merton died by a CIA-perpetrated assassination and declare the case closed on the basis of their considerable but inconclusive research. Turley and Martin go as far as to cast a wide net of accusations of cover-up and complicity on the part of Merton's monastic community and authoritative scholars and devotees. A third bibliographic item claiming to have deciphered the puzzle of "how Merton actually died" is a rambling piece in *The Irish Times*²⁰ in which the author debunks the assassination theories of Turley and Martin as "preposterous" in favor of his own notion that Merton committed suicide out of "Catholic guilt" in the aftermath of his affair with M. While all of these theoretical assertions are accompanied by a sizeable amount of fact-collecting, the tendentious manner of the most vocal of their authors undercuts their credibility as

17. Robert Hudson, *The Monk's Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

18. Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation* (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018).

19. Jerome Donovan, *Thomas Merton Meets the Unspeakable: Rendezvous in Thailand* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2018).

20. John Cooney, "Reconsidering Thomas Merton, Who Died 50 Years Ago Today," *The Irish Times* (10 Dec. 2018); available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/reconsidering-thomas-merton-who-died-50-years-ago-today-1.3723942>.

investigative journalists in pursuit of the truth. Despite their protests, the shadow of doubt lingers. For more extensive discussions of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*, see the review by Michael W. Higgins in this volume of *The Merton Annual*, as well as the review by Paul Dekar in *The Merton Seasonal*.²¹

A healthy number of periodical articles also tell of Merton's engagement with specific people, places and events during his lifetime. A handful of ephemera recollect or relate second-hand brief encounters with Merton at some specific time or location in the days before his fame²² or some fleeting but memorable interaction with Merton after he achieved renown.²³ A more substantial piece focusing on a significant chapter in Merton's past is Patricia Lefevere's "Memories of Merton's Path Linger at St. Bonaventure University"²⁴ with informative details of Merton's life and work on campus, along with updates by way of an interview with St. Bonaventure alumnus and contemporary Merton scholar Daniel Horan, confirming the lasting imprint made by Merton's tenure there.

Some weightier periodical articles feature Merton in the shadow of the Vietnam War. For instance, James G. R. Cronin's "Burn His Books: American Catholic Opposition to Thomas Merton in 1968"²⁵ relays with reportorial efficiency a contentious occurrence that played out in the diocesan newspaper in Merton's Kentucky home in 1968, involving his publicized pastoral support of a conscientious objector to the war. The matter divided the local Roman Catholic population; among those who condemned Merton was an irate citizen who announced his intentions to burn the books of "this publicity seeking 'devout' priest" (21). Fiona Gardner's "Crisis and Mystery: Thomas Merton and the Vietnam War,"²⁶ takes a more abstract

21. Paul R. Dekar, "A Challenge to the Standard Account," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.4 (Winter 2018) 37-39.

22. See Cassidy Klein, "The Lasting Legacy of Thomas Merton, the Catholic Spiritual Thinker Who Once Called Queens Home," *QNS* (27 November 2018); available at: <https://qns.com/story/2018/11/27/lasting-legacy-thomas-merton-catholic-spiritual-thinker-called-queens-home>.

23. See Colman McCarthy, "When Thomas Merton Called Me 'Utterly Stupid,'" *National Catholic Reporter* (17 December 2018); available at: <https://wwwncronline.org>; and G. W. Smith, "Getting to Gethsemani: A Nun's Encounter with Merton," *Commonweal* 145.10 (1 June 2018) 22-27.

24. Patricia Lefevere, "Memories of Merton's Path Linger at St. Bonaventure University," *National Catholic Reporter* (7 December 2018); available at: <https://wwwncronline.org>.

25. James G. R. Cronin, "Burn His Books: American Catholic Opposition to Thomas Merton in 1968," *The Merton Journal* 25.2 (Advent 2018) 16-23.

26. Fiona Gardner, "Crisis and Mystery: Thomas Merton and the Vietnam War," *The Merton Journal* 25.2 (Advent 2018) 3-13.

approach to the relationship of Merton to the war that escalated across the globe and in his conscience during the last years of his life. Gardner argues persuasively for the mystical quality of the coincidence that going into and coming home from the last leg of his 1968 Asian pilgrimage, Merton shared a plane with U.S. soldiers, the return flight in corporeal company, as well as spiritual solidarity, with the war's fatalities. Both of these articles demonstrate the accuracy of Gardner's words: "The crisis of the Vietnam War was . . . Thomas Merton's crisis too" (4).

Providing a compressed biography within a lengthy essay – handy for an audience unfamiliar with the details of Merton's life – is Alan Jacobs' article "Thomas Merton, the Monk Who Became a Prophet,"²⁷ published in *The New Yorker*, thus another testament to Merton's broad appeal. Jacobs selects facts from his life story to emphasize Merton's embodiment of the contrary impulses to engage with and to withdraw from the world, a paradox that characterized much of his time on earth.

Also addressing the role of paradox in Merton's spirituality is Austen Ivereigh's "The Trappist and the Jesuit,"²⁸ in which this author of two biographies of Pope Francis²⁹ writes:

Earlier this year I asked Francis about Merton's impact on him, and added a speculative question: if Merton were alive today and came to visit you in the Casa Santa Marta, what would you talk about? . . . Francis replied that one book above all had been a big influence on him and his Catholic Action circle in Buenos Aires when he was a teenager – Merton's best-selling conversion memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Published in 1948 and soon after in a Spanish translation, it "opened up new horizons for Catholics," Francis said, using the very phrase he had deployed in Congress. The Pope's answer to my other question was just one word . . . *Freedom*. (8)

Ivereigh goes on to use the framing device of an imagined dialogue between Merton and Francis to analyze the source of their similar "creativity and dynamism" (9). The concise but substantive piece, based on

27. Alan Jacobs, "Thomas Merton, the Monk Who Became a Prophet: Fifty Years after His Death, Merton's Contradictions Have Made His Work All the More Instructive," *The New Yorker* (28 December 2018); available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/thomas-merton-the-monk-who-became-a-prophet>.

28. Austen Ivereigh, "The Trappist and the Jesuit," *The Tablet* 272.9281 (15 December 2018) 8-9.

29. Austen Ivereigh, *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014). Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019); in the latter book, Ivereigh relates the same details of Merton's early influence on the future pope (20-21).

a presentation given at the Bellarmine Thomas Merton Center earlier in 2018, focuses primarily on how these two high-profile religious figures, both objects of intense admiration and fervent opposition, experienced personal encounters of the freedom of human existence interacting with the mercy of God, conversion experiences that ultimately shaped their development of a higher level of consciousness capable of discerning the difference between contradictions that demand a concrete choice and those that can be “held in tension” (9) wherein the Holy Spirit can renew the world.

An intensive treatment of a series of events within one episode in Merton’s writing life is Patrick F. O’Connell’s article, “Getting (to) the Message: Thomas Merton and the 1967 Synod of Bishops,”³⁰ in which the author clears up the details of a textual mystery involving Merton’s popular essay, “Letter on the Contemplative Life,” which he wrote in answer to a request from Pope Paul VI in August of 1967 to contribute to a joint message from contemplatives to the world, to be included in an address to the 1967 Synod of Bishops. But, as O’Connell goes on to explain, there is no apparent textual kinship between the letter and the address eventually delivered to the synod. With his facility for meticulous scholarship, O’Connell identifies and analyzes the “missing link” as Merton’s second, more structured, response to the commission from Rome, a piece that was never published but served as a major source of the final message requested by Pope Paul VI. Furthermore, the material of that message was subsequently revised into an essay published as “The Contemplative and the Atheist.” O’Connell’s article gives an informative snapshot of Merton’s writing process; and by quoting from the journals in which Merton notes his misgivings about fulfilling the papal bidding, it also displays Merton’s complicated relationship with the institutional Church at that point in his life and reveals what Daniel Horan calls “Merton’s unabashed humanity.”³¹

Merton Eternally Present

The recently deceased literary scholar Harold Bloom, in his 2019 memoir *Possessed by Memory*, reflects on how communion, via the written word,

30. Patrick F. O’Connell, “Getting (to) the Message: Thomas Merton and the 1967 Synod of Bishops,” *American Catholic Studies* 129.1 (Spring 2018) 27-52.

31. Daniel P. Horan, “Why Should Anyone Care about Thomas Merton Today?” *National Catholic Reporter* (10 December 2018); available at: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/why-should-anyone-care-about-thomas-merton-today>; see also Daniel P. Horan, “Seeds of Inspiration: The Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton (1915-1968),” *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018) 49-55.

remains forever possible between the living and the beloved dead. This is not an original notion, certainly, but one enhanced by Bloom's poignant description of his own lifelong experiences as a reader yearning for "the voice that was heard before the world was made" (Bloom 3). An earlier tribute to Merton as one of those timeless voices is *We Are Already One*,³² the 2015 celebratory collection of essays by over one hundred individuals reflecting on his legacy upon the occasion of his centenary. Skimming the table of contents, one sees titles bearing present progressive verb phrases such "looking at," "learning from" and "listening to," grammatical affirmations of a continuous relationship between Merton and his readers. Three years later, noting this most recent milestone, a robust output of newly released material suggests that many Merton admirers continue to listen and learn.

Among the 2018 yield is the book, edited by Jon M. Sweeney, *What I Am Living For*,³³ similar to *We Are Already One* in that it also contains personal essays, referred to as "lessons," by an array of writers, diverse in age, background and religious affiliation, many with high profiles of their own, all connected by the enduring influence of Thomas Merton's witness to faith. The source of Sweeney's book title and epigraph is the following passage from *My Argument with the Gestapo*: "if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for."³⁴ In his review of the book in this volume of *The Merton Annual*, David Belcastro uses these words as a finger pointing to the moon; while he acknowledges the laudable content of this impressive anthology, he reminds us that its greatest value is not merely the pleasure of reading more "Merton-and-me" experiences, but rather its implicit invitation to readers to conduct our own "what I am living for" exploration.

Other items in this category could be subsumed under the heading "Merton in His Own Words." One example is *Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences*,³⁵ a gathering of Merton's previously

32. Jonathan Montaldo and Gray Henry, eds. *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope, Reflections to Honor His Centenary (1915-2015)* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014).

33. Jon M. Sweeney, ed., *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2018).

34. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 160-61.

35. Thomas Merton, *Cistercian Fathers and Forefathers: Essays and Conferences*, edited with an introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2018).

uncollected articles and conference transcriptions on medieval monastic figures, impeccably edited by Patrick F. O’Connell, whose nine previously edited volumes of Merton’s monastic conferences have facilitated readers in accessing the expansive mind and resonant voice of Merton the teacher. In the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual*, Kathleen O’Neill, OCSO summarizes the book’s abundant content and offers occasional personal remarks, sometimes drawing from her kindred experience as a sister in Merton’s order.

Another example is the newly released edition of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*,³⁶ a book that readers may recognize as identical in content to *Contemplative Prayer*,³⁷ a different title chosen for the purpose of expanding the audience beyond the monastic enclosure. The 2018 version restores the original title of this slender book in which the monk speaks on many aspects of prayer, the core experience of any life of faith. George G. Kehoe’s review of this book may be found in this volume of *The Merton Annual*.

Another return of an earlier work, not by but about Merton, is the fortieth anniversary edition of James Finley’s *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*,³⁸ a valued resource for the past four decades. Within the new packaging is an updated contextualizing preface in which Finley shares a dream he once had long ago (recognizable to those who have been privileged to hear his mellifluous voice relate it in person) of being on stage where he is poised to deliver a formal address on Merton and the principles of folk dancing, only to be upstaged, much to his initial resentment, by the sudden luminous appearance of Merton himself performing said folk dances. Eventually, everyone in the room is folk dancing: “I can recall,” Finley writes, “thinking in the dream, what are you doing here? You’re dead!” (xii). It does not require a psychologist’s training to interpret this prefatory dream that at once captures the ageless verve of his former spiritual master as it calls out the vulnerability of human beings, himself included, to the spiritual perils of overthinking. Much more than a work of erudition, Finley’s study of Merton’s theology of the True Self also invites readers to cast off that “awful solemnity”³⁹ and join in the dancing. And after four decades, his words remain resonant with the wisdom of Merton

36. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018); originally issued by Cistercian Publications in 1969.

37. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).

38. James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2018).

39. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297.

for the benefit of a new generation of pilgrims on the contemplative path to Nowhere. One of those younger readers, Cassidy Hall, responds to Finley's book in the reviews section of this volume.

What concept could be more inextricably linked to a belief in the infinite Divine than prayer? Quite rightly, a number of books from 2018, while not exclusively about Merton, include Merton in their citations of figures in the pantheon of prayer. One example is Larry Hart's curiously titled *From the Stone Age to Thomas Merton: A Short History of Contemplative Prayer*.⁴⁰ The book's slight size and conversational tone belie its breadth as an overview of the human soul's thrust toward union with God, beginning with the earliest eras of human history. In his survey of the practice of unitive prayer, Hart quotes and paraphrases selectively from the works of revered spiritual role models, Merton among the most often quoted (yet not as frequently as the title might lead one to expect).

One contemplative whose writing is not indexed in Hart's bibliography is Saint John of the Cross, in whom Merton had an early interest, as demonstrated in his book *The Ascent to Truth*.⁴¹ Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes' *Saint John of the Cross*⁴² acknowledges this early affinity of Merton's for the Carmelite saint and includes multiple citations that convey Merton's identification with the famous metaphor of the dark night used by John of the Cross to depict the experience of mystical prayer.

Joining the aforementioned *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, which speaks directly from Merton's pen, additional works of 2018 situate selections from Merton's original writing within new formats to create new aids for enriching our prayer lives. One example is John Moses' *The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Vision*.⁴³ Moses pairs images from Merton's "brush and ink drawings" (xx) with choice passages from his writings, thus combining the visual and the verbal, two powerful forms of expression, that according to Paul Pearson's Foreword, were "equally important to Merton" (xv). Moses showcases his own creative talents in his organization of the book's sections, beginning with "Encountering God" (1-19) and culminating in "On Being in Christ" (125-41), subtitles that capture the eternal destiny of Merton's life of divine passion. Pearson sums up this book as one not to be studied

40. Larry Hart, *From the Stone Age to Thomas Merton: A Short History of Contemplative Prayer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

41. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

42. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes, *Saint John of the Cross: His Prophetic Mysticism in the Historical Context of Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Washington, DC: Pacem in Terris Press, 2018).

43. John Moses, ed., *The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Vision* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018).

but contemplated (see xv). For more discussion, see the review by Paul Pynkoski in this volume.

Another book that fits Pearson's previously quoted description is *Silence, Joy: A Selection of Writings by Thomas Merton*,⁴⁴ edited by Christopher Wait, a collection of poems and excerpts from longer works by Merton arranged to produce a book, like that by John Moses, that could become a prized resource for personal meditation or prayer. Wait selects works or excerpts that expound on some of the most profound concepts common to human existence about which Merton speaks with uncommon power and grace. Prominent among those topics are solitude, silence and the true self.

Reinforcing Merton's abiding relevance within the broader context of ecumenism is *Spiritual Voices*, a collection of essays by (and about) select figures who may be seen as "bridges of greater understanding and compassion amongst the spiritual traditions of the world's religions" ("Introduction"). Among those voices representing multiple religious faiths and practices, is that of Michael W. Higgins, whose opening article "Prophecy and Contemplation – Thomas Merton as Spiritual Icon"⁴⁵ inaugurates this gathering of reflections (strikingly adorned by a drawing of the visage of each contributor), by portraying Merton as one whose sustained affinity for the heterodox visionary poet and artist, William Blake, includes a shared search for "a wider integration," a characteristic that makes Merton "the ideal model" of spiritual openness for our time (26).

A book whose title announces the vibrant bounty within its covers is *Superabundantly Alive*⁴⁶ by Susan McCaslin and J. S. Porter, reviewed by Katharine Bubel in the present volume of the *Annual*. With scholarly analysis, confessional reflection, striking shaped verse, clever and revelatory authorial dialogue and sensitively imagined letters to influential women in Merton's life, McCaslin and Porter provide a pleasingly unconventional but masterful examination of the role of feminine wisdom in Merton's life and works. That Merton has bequeathed this wisdom to live on in the minds of those who read him speaks throughout this book, as the following words by co-author J. S. Porter relate: "We no longer have Merton with us with his rapid-fire speech, his pinball walk, his

44. Thomas Merton, *Silence, Joy: A Selection of Writings by Thomas Merton*, ed. Christopher Wait (New York: New Directions, 2018); see "Cherishing the Stillness," the review by Wayne Simsic, *The Merton Seasonal* 44.1 (Spring 2019) 29-30.

45. Michael W. Higgins, "Prophecy and Contemplation – Thomas Merton as Spiritual Icon," *Spiritual Voices*, ed. Eleanor Clitheroe and S. Brooke Anderson (2018) 12-27.

46. Susan McCaslin and J. S. Porter, *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* (Kelowna, BC: Woodlake Publishing, 2018).

Zorba handshake. What we have is his voice on the pages of his books. His voice is warm and inclusive. . . . When I first read Merton, he seemed to speak from my centre, and, over time, he amplified the music of my inner voice” (40-41).

In *Awakening Desire: Encountering the Divine Feminine in the Masculine Christian Journey*⁴⁷ by Irene Alexander, one finds additional treatment of the formative role of women in the maturation of Thomas Merton’s psyche and soul. Although not the deep dive and exclusive exploration of Merton and the feminine conducted by McCaslin and Porter, it is noteworthy for its integration of Merton’s experience and voice, especially his poetic voice, as heard in the prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, into a general discussion about overcoming barriers to union with God, obstructions stemming from restrictive concepts of gender in relation to the Divine, a subject with universal resonance.

Also touching on the subject of Merton’s psychological development is Susan Tiberghien’s *Writing toward Wholeness: Lessons Inspired by C. G. Jung*,⁴⁸ with its introductory discourse (and brief instructional materials) on the role of journaling in achieving and maintaining mental well-being, discussions in which Merton, while not the primary focus, but by virtue of his prolific journaling, appears as a point of reference throughout.

The all-embracing question of how to reconcile the reality of suffering with faith in a loving God is the subject of David Orberon’s *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer: From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen*.⁴⁹ Charting new territory in Merton studies, Orberon systematically traces Merton’s progress of coming to terms with the relentless enigma of theodicy, basically a journey from holding the orthodox Catholic view of the redemptive potency of suffering toward a more contemplative approach to tribulation viewed through the lens of Buddhist thought. Merton’s well-documented history of childhood trauma and persistent ill health deepens the relevance of Orberon’s study. The book is thin, and at least one reviewer has gently suggested that more comparative analysis between Christian and Buddhist views of the “problem of evil,” while not essential to fulfilling the book’s intentions, could have enhanced its effect.⁵⁰ See the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual* for Bernadette

47. Irene Alexander, *Awakening Desire: Encountering the Divine Feminine in the Masculine Christian Journey* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

48. Susan Tiberghien, *Writing toward Wholeness: Lessons Inspired by C. G. Jung* (Asheville, NC: Chiron Press, 2018).

49. David Orberon, *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer: From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

50. Joseph Q. Raab, “The Poisoned Arrow and the Koan of Job,” *The Merton Seasonal* 43.4 (Winter 2018) 34-36.

McNary-Zak's helpful commentary on this groundbreaking book.

Capping off this discussion of books in which Merton's enduring presence can be felt is Mary Gordon's *On Thomas Merton*.⁵¹ I awaited the publication of this book with high expectations of a work devoted to Merton the belletrist. Moreover, with fond memories of reading Gordon's early novels, particularly *The Company of Women*,⁵² I anticipated *On Thomas Merton* to be gratifying reading. In the opening chapter, Gordon admits that when she was approached about writing this monograph, she jumped at the invitation, despite her knowing that she "had a lot of catching up to do" (3) on her reading. She announces her intentions to engage Merton in a "writer to writer" (4) dialogue, while voicing her own uncertainty as to her readiness to "uncouple the writer from the priest," but soon declares such a feat "impossible" (7). She acknowledges the challenges of her project and describes the self-questioning involved in deciding what to talk about when "talking about Thomas Merton" (4) as almost "paralyzing" (5). Finally, she lays out those elements of his canon that she considers most laudable and relatable and on which she intends to comment, along with her rationale for eliminating virtually everything else but *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *My Argument with the Gestapo* and the seven volumes of journals. She goes about her defined purpose with the skill and confidence of the distinguished writer and professor she is, moving from amply quoted material to incisive observation. To be clear: to narrow one's focus when dealing critically with the heft of Merton's body of work is not only understandable; it is essential. Furthermore, to pass judgment on Gordon's praise or disapproval of the particularities in the works of her selected focus is an undertaking I pass on to others. However, what dedicated reader of the literary Merton could be faulted for flinching at some of her justifications for sweepingly dismissing his vast and complex body of poetry: because he is "not as great a poet" as she wished, because he never addressed "the spiritual and the political" in his poetry (6) or that his literary criticism is "unremarkable" because it focuses primarily on novels when he himself "never wrote a conventional novel" (6)? Respectfully, I submit that Gordon did *not* catch up on her reading but persevered in this project nevertheless, adhering to questionable explanations for omissions sure to mystify seasoned Merton readers. And she apparently did so for the most universal of reasons, one that often leads to precipitous actions: she "fell in love," and was not sure whether she loved "a writer or a personality" (4). This complication reveals itself throughout this book, in some cases dramatically, and warrants a longer

51. Mary Gordon, *On Thomas Merton* (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 2018).

52. Mary Gordon, *The Company of Women* (New York: Random House, 1981).

discussion than space in a bibliographic survey allows,⁵³ except to say this: *On Thomas Merton* is inarguably representative of this category of Merton Eternally Present, yet with its abridged attention to his craft on the part of such a pre-eminent craftswoman and critic as Mary Gordon, it does not deliver the satisfying contribution to Merton studies one might hope for. For further assessment, see the review essay by Malgorzata Poks in this volume.

Articles

As expected, *The Merton Journal* also provided compelling reading in 2018. In its two issues, Merton's living presence is realized in a number of settings. For example, in the Eastertide issue, two essays present Merton in relationship with other writers and kindred thinkers, such as "Spiritual Formation and 'Progress in Prayer' in the Merton-Gullick Letters,"⁵⁴ in which Bonnie Bowman Thurston discusses the charming correspondence between Merton and Gullick in the 1960s, letters emanating their mutual encouragement of one another, particularly for the strengthening of their contemplative prayer lives. Thurston's article is joined by Ron Dart's "Hermann Hesse and Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities."⁵⁵ Dart lays out areas of commonality between the two authors, emphasizing their shared interest in the contemplative life and their prophetic resistance to the perception of incompatibility between Eastern and Western religions.

Also in the Eastertide issue, in its reprinting of a 1986 series of reflections by the late theologian Kenneth Leech ("Silence and Prayer," "Silence and Conflict" and "Silence and Ministry"⁵⁶), Merton is absent in name only, for according to Terry Drummond, the influence of Thomas Merton on [Kenneth Leech's] journey of faith was profound⁵⁷ because for Leech, whose vocation called him to the streets, rather than the cloister,

53. For a provocative review of *On Thomas Merton* that attempts to deconstruct Gordon's psychological attachment to her subject and expose the hypocrisy of Thomas Merton, see Gary Wills, "Shallow Calls to Shallow: Thomas Merton Fifty Years after His Death," *Harper's* (April 2019); available at: <https://harpers.org/archive/2019/04/on-thomas-merton-mary-gordon-review>.

54. Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Spiritual Formation & 'Progress in Prayer' in the Merton-Gullick Letters," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 31-42.

55. Ron Dart, "Hermann Hesse & Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 48-61.

56. Kenneth Leech, "Silence and Prayer," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 20-23; "Silence and Ministry," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 43-46; "Silence and Conflict," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 62-64.

57. Terry Drummond, "Ken Leech – Contemplative Priest, Prophet and Friend," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 3-4.

Merton's monastic witness to the necessity of prayerful silence was indispensable in helping Leech to maintain an inner peace in the often noisy and crowded settings of his public ministry. In the reprints of two items originally composed decades earlier, Leech himself explicitly addresses Merton's importance: "Thomas Merton – Theologian of Resistance" and "Theology and the Back Streets."⁵⁸ Kenneth Leech is also no longer among the living, but his voice dons its own timelessness as it conveys the current applicability of Merton's prophetic message of social justice.

Also on the subject of Merton and social justice, in the Advent issue of *The Merton Journal*, Gordon Oyer's "Interior Freedom and an Activist Conscience"⁵⁹ delineates four core priorities that served as "compass points" in Merton's forays into advocacy and activism: truth exists; everyone embodies truth; non-violence is the only way to enact truth in society; and a commitment to enacting truth calls for solidarity with the suffering of others (48-49). Oyer demonstrates how these principles evolved over specific periods in Merton's monastic life, and he reflects on ways that the spirit of Thomas Merton may inform contemporary social protest movements.

Articles in *Commonweal* offer uplifting reminders of why people still read Thomas Merton today. For example, Luke Timothy Johnson's "How a Monk Learns Mercy"⁶⁰ lucidly explains how living under the *Rule* of Benedict, with its emphasis on mercy, permanently shaped Merton's conscience so that the unstrained quality of mercy remained the stable center of his relationships with others, despite his changing outer disposition toward the world. Johnson concludes that while monasticism no longer functions as Merton once lived it, its lessons in mercy may still be learned through communal prayer, song, silence, contrition and humility; and as Merton embodied those lessons even in his "turning toward the world," so may we who live in the world do likewise.

A fitting complement to Johnson's discourse is the substantial essay "Thomas Merton and Monastic Renewal"⁶¹ by Michael Casey, OCSO. Casey summarizes in detail the ebb and flow of Merton's recorded opin-

58. Kenneth Leech, "Thomas Merton – Theologian of Resistance," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 5-17; Kenneth Leech, "Theology and the Back Streets," *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (Eastertide 2018) 25-30.

59. Gordon Oyer, "Interior Freedom and an Activist Conscience: Thomas Merton's Journey with Social Movements," *The Merton Journal* 25.2 (Advent 2018) 47-59.

60. Luke Timothy Johnson, "How a Monk Learns Mercy: Thomas Merton and the Rule of Saint Benedict," *Commonweal* 145.16 (5 October 2018); available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/how-a-monk-learns-mercy>.

61. Michael Casey, OCSO, "Thomas Merton and Monastic Renewal," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 53.2 (2018) 159-87.

ions of Gethsemani, of his order and of monasticism in general over the course of his monastic life. Casey concludes by reporting on the current status of Merton's expressed concerns, criticisms and hopes for renewal in monasticism.

Michael W. Higgins' "Merton and Blake, Revisited"⁶² brings more of its author's expert testimony on the ingrained nature of Thomas Merton's relationship with William Blake, specifically their shared "big sky" minds and their aligned recognition that the progress of the soul toward union with God is a process of reconciling contraries. Higgins points out that while other "Catholic heavyweights" experienced lapses in their reputations after death, interest in Merton has not waned, and in times of bewildering divisions, many take heart from his Blakean message of unity.

As a sort of coda to Higgins's fine discussion, in that it also speaks of the connection between Merton and the English Romantics, is John Smelcer's "Merton, America Has Need of You."⁶³ In response to the current distressing dramas playing out in the nation's houses of power and privilege, Smelcer invokes William Wordsworth, whose sonnet "London 1802," calling upon the seventeenth-century epic poet John Milton for spiritual guidance in a time of moral crisis, supplies a creative template for composing a similar message to Thomas Merton in 2018.

Also speaking on behalf of our troubled world, a few weeks after the October 2019 bishops' summit on the environmental threat to the Amazon, Pope Francis remarked, "We have to introduce . . . in the catechism of the Catholic Church, the sin against ecology, the sin against our common home, because it's a duty."⁶⁴ The Pope's words authoritatively introduce the poetic scholarship of Christopher Pramuk, whose article "Contemplation and the Suffering Earth: Thomas Merton, Pope Francis, and the Next Generation"⁶⁵ places Merton's vatic grasp of our ecological imperative within the current context of our impending existential crisis, as we face the consequences of our prolonged dereliction of duty toward the natural world. Pramuk argues that while an intellectual buy-in to the scientific

62. Michael W. Higgins, "Merton and Blake, Revisited," *Commonweal* (8 December 2018); available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/merton-blake-revisited>.

63. John Smelcer, "Merton, America Has Need of You," *Tikkun* (28 November 2018); available at: <https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/thomas-merton-america-has-need-of-you>.

64. Inés San Martín, "Pope Considering Adding 'Sin against Ecology' to Church's Catechism," *Crux: Taking the Catholic Pulse* (15 November 2019); available at: https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2019/11/15/pope-considering-adding-sin-against-ecology-to-churchs-catechism/?fbclid=IwAR32vxzM2jPiC_U22RL9uG96EOCpWwalkLOz0ci1JpeD8z7JWR7d7UrhF8Q.

65. Christopher Pramuk, "Contemplation and the Suffering Earth: Thomas Merton, Pope Francis, and the Next Generation," *Open Theology* 4 (2018) 212-27.

reality of the problem is essential, a conversion of spirit is equally vital if we are to avert our doom. In harmony with the words of Pope Francis proclaiming that the world must undertake “fresh analysis of our present situation, which is in many ways unprecedented,”⁶⁶ Pramuk’s commanding essay proposes that the only genuine hope for eliminating this unparalleled threat (and answering for humanity’s violation of the divine commission to care for the earth) requires a radical integration of mind and soul so that we might follow Merton’s contemplative path to the full recognition of the sacred unity among all entities occupying our common home.

Other Media

Contributions to Merton-related resources and scholarship via media other than print deserve special acknowledgement. What more effective way of finding Merton in the moment than to hear his physical voice in the act of being a teacher, a poet and a man of learning? Now You Know Media, of Rockville, Maryland, has released or re-released four more CD collections of talks by Merton, including *Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose: The Philosophy of the Great Latin Fathers*;⁶⁷ *Thomas Merton’s Great Sermons and Reflections*;⁶⁸ *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T.S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir*;⁶⁹ and *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner*.⁷⁰ Additionally, a series of eloquent lectures by Michael W. Higgins on two figures he calls “sacred disrupters” is contained in the CD set entitled *Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen: Spiritual Guides for the 21st Century*.⁷¹ Patrick O’Connell’s analysis of the recorded talks by Merton can be found in the reviews section of this volume.

In *Point Vierge: Thomas Merton’s Journey in Song*,⁷² Alana Levan-

66. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home Encyclical Letter* (2015) par 17.

67. *Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose: The Philosophy of the Great Latin Fathers* [CDs] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018); see “Merton among the Doctors,” the review by John Allard, OP, *The Merton Seasonal* 44.4 (Winter 2019) 28-30.

68. *Thomas Merton’s Great Sermons and Reflections* [CDs] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018).

69. *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T.S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir* [CDs] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018).

70. *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner* [CDs] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018).

71. *Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen: Spiritual Guides for the 21st Century* [CDs] (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018); see “Sacred Disruptors as Spiritual Guides,” the review by Gray Matthews, *The Merton Seasonal* 44.1 (Spring 2018) 33-35.

72. Alana Levandoski and James Finley, *Point Vierge: Thomas Merton’s Journey in Song* [CD] (Cantus Productions, 2018).

doski combines her musical talents – instrumentation, song and chant – with the speaking voice of James Finley in recordings of arranged excerpts from Merton’s writing. The pieces bear titles that relate to a recognizable work or theme in Merton’s writing or a life experience; titles such as “Fourth and Walnut,” “Mother/Father” and “Disappear into God” are three especially gripping compositions.

Finally, a number of tributes to the essential role of the visual arts in Merton’s life also marked the fiftieth anniversary of his death. These include Susan Griffin Ward’s *Looking for the Sun at Merton’s Corner: A Collection of Portraits*,⁷³ a photographic testament to the legacy of Merton’s famous epiphany at the intersection of Fourth and Walnut (since renamed Muhammad Ali Blvd.), captured in these words found on the publisher’s webpage: “Over the course of a year, inspired by Thomas Merton and searching for proof of goodness and compassion in the world, Susan Griffin Ward stood at the corner at Fourth and Muhammad Ali looking for the sun. This book is a record of the people she met on that corner, the light in each one of them shining like a beacon in the dark.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.⁷⁵

Among Merton’s most famous journal passages is his December 4, 1968 account of his experience a few days before of viewing the Buddhas at Polonnaruwa: “Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious.”⁷⁶ He continues, “I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for” (*OSM* 323). In communion with William Faulkner’s Dilsey, who after hearing the Easter sermon delivered by the Reverend

73. Susan Griffin Ward, *Looking for the Sun at Merton’s Corner: A Collection of Portraits* (Blurb, 2018).

74. Available at: <https://www.blurb.com/b/8606765-looking-for-the-sun-at-merton-s-corner>.

75. W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” *The Collected Poems of W. H. Auden* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 247-48; subsequent references will be cited as “Auden” parenthetically in the text.

76. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 323; subsequent references will be cited as “*OSM*” parenthetically in the text.

Shegog, “sat bolt upright . . . crying rigidly and quietly in the annealment and the blood of the remembered Lamb,”⁷⁷ Merton could be saying that he too “had seed de beginnin en now [he] sees de endin” (Faulkner 185). With the conviction brought about by moments of mystical ecstasy, Merton, like Dilsey, speaks as one who has transcended linear notions of time, artificial structures and the illusions of separateness they perpetuate, and having achieved that perfect ripening of consciousness – i.e., the fullness of time – he now knows that all is compassion.

Would that Merton’s death had not come like a thief in the night (or an assassin in the afternoon) but as the natural end of a long life under that Kentucky sky he had taken for his identity early in his monastic life. Would that the circumstances of his death had not become a feast for conspiracy theorists or for those whose appetite for controversy may divert attention away from the true significance of his last day on Earth. December 10, 1968 was the day the words stopped. No journal entry was made. The earthen “vessel lay emptied of its poetry” (Auden 248) – *The Geography of Lograire*⁷⁸ permanently suspended in a state of “purely tentative first draft” (*GL* 1), unborn revisions never to be delivered by his hand.

As the voice of James Finley, in the musical arrangement “Disappear into God,” assures us, “When people die, they don’t go anywhere” (Levandoski). Having become fully integrated into the divine love which all people may come to know through contemplation, the dead may remain forever present. Although the day of Merton’s death was the day he transitioned into the holy silence of eternity, his extraordinary voice continues to speak to those who have ears. He joins us in the breaking of the Bread; we encounter him in the opening of his books, and we perpetuate his legacy by sharing his wit and wisdom through our own imaginative visions and revisions. May we continue to seek the infinite truth of his eternal mind more so than the finite vexing details of his death. May we also continue to increase the resources that bear his name – just as the authors and artists represented here in this volume of *The Merton Annual* have done – and may the channeling of his timeless voice persist fifty years hence and beyond.

77. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994) 185; subsequent references will be cited as “Faulkner” parenthetically in the text.

78. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); subsequent references will be cited as “*GL*” parenthetically in the text.