

Finding Your Right Mind in This Mad Place: An Introduction

Joseph Q. Raab

Thomas Merton's *Emblems in a Season of Fury* (1963)¹ is a hauntingly disturbing mélange that pairs bucolic and lyrical poems² with searing and sardonic cries for social justice.³ It was to this collection that Michael Higgins, Mark Meade and the other members of the conference program committee turned when seeking a title and a theme for the 2019 General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS). The title chosen for the conference, *O Peace, Bless This Mad Place*, was drawn from the poem "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing" (*ESF* 51; *CP* 353) and served as a benediction/petition setting the stage for the conference. "Silence, love this growth" is the line that follows the one selected for the conference title and it was included in the call for papers issued in anticipation of the meeting. Merton admirers, scholars and aficionados generously responded to the conference invitation and the call for papers, and later came to meet on the beautiful campus of Santa Clara University in California's San Francisco Bay Area for the Sixteenth General Meeting of the ITMS in June of 2019.

Many presenters at the conference seized on the signal of an apocalyptic moment and sought, in the spirit of Merton, the seeds of hope and peace amidst all the madness. Others, noting the Jesuit connection to Santa Clara University, saw an opportunity to explore Merton's own Jesuit connections, his ambition to discover along with St. Ignatius a way of "finding God in all things," or his special friendship with the Jesuit priest, poet and prophet Daniel Berrigan. Whatever the entrée, presenters engaged the persistent challenges of our mad world, such as racism, xenophobia and war, and elucidated a Mertonian response that emphasized dialogue, communion and peacebuilding. The articles included in this volume, all developed from presentations given at the ITMS conference, in one way or another point readers back to the real Prince of Peace, and to the growth hidden beneath the stones of these dark times.

1. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) (subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" parenthetically in the text); reprinted in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 303-91 (subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text).

2. See for example "O Sweet Irrational Worship" (*ESF* 42-43; *CP* 344-45).

3. See for example "And the Children of Birmingham" (*ESF* 33-35; *CP* 335-37).

The editors have the privilege of making available here two of the plenary addresses from the ITMS meeting: **Rose Marie Berger**'s "Direct Transmission of Faith" and **Robert Ellsberg**'s "'The Gate of Heaven Is Everywhere': The Faith Journey of Thomas Merton." Berger's powerful piece reminds us that the liberating spirit of the gospel is transmitted through direct contact with the prophets and pastors who live by that spirit. Daniel Berrigan and Thomas Merton, among others, are transmitters in the genealogy of Berger's own prophetic ministry and in her address she challenged her audience to "keep Merton weird." Merton's marginal status helped him point other beggars outside the mainstream in the direction of where they could "find the bread" and Berger reminds us, with all the irony and ambiguity this intends, that in a mad place, the weird ones are actually the sane ones. Ellsberg's address insightfully and often humorously traces the familiar story of Merton's journey. Echoing Berger he suggests that Merton is a more effective evangelist as an outsider and contends that domesticating him through an ecclesiastical process of canonization may not be good for either Merton or for the Church.

Merton's prophetic perspective on the U.S. civil rights movement is the focus of two fine pieces of scholarship available in this volume. The essays by **Gregory Hillis** and **Paul Dekar** treat in widening circles Merton's critique of racial injustice in the American context of the 1960s. Hillis's more tightly focused "Letters to a Black Catholic Priest: Thomas Merton, Fr. August Thompson and the Civil Rights Movement" illuminates a kind of mentoring relationship between the monk of Gethsemani and a black parish priest in Louisiana that transpired from 1963 until Merton's death in 1968. Dekar's piece, "God's Messenger: Thomas Merton on Racial Justice" widens the scope beyond the Merton/Thompson correspondence and includes Merton's epistolary relations with the musician Robert Lawrence Williams and the author James Baldwin. These pieces help to expand a view of Merton's pastoral and prophetic involvement with an immensely important social issue that remains no less important today.

Michael Plekon zeros in on the liturgical heart of Christian prophecy in his essay "Communion and Engagement: Merton, Berrigan and the Eucharist in Peacemaking and Protest." Gordon Oyer's vivid reconstruction of the 1964 Gethsemani peacemakers retreat⁴ provides the setting for Plekon's piece which explores the retreat within the framework of the Mass, moving the reader from a liturgy of the word into the liturgy of the Eucharist. In this engaging essay, Plekon insightfully highlights what Berrigan and Merton both appreciated as the source and the sum-

4. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

mit of prophetic work and protest, the source that Merton evoked in his poem “Love Winter . . .” with the images of “vegetal words” and an “unsettling sun.”

In the article that follows, **Liam Lynch** ironically and effectively turns to a hermit for guidance on community-building and welcoming the stranger. “Contemplative Cosmopolitanism: Thomas Merton’s Response to Xenophobia” takes an unflinching look at a time (our time?) when “hatred becomes patriotism” and “the gangster is enthroned in power”⁵ and he seeks to recover the contemplative ground of creative action from which true community can be born. Lynch finds the effective response not only in Merton’s prophetic denunciations of a mad world but also in the contemplative practices embedded in the Benedictine *Rule* that formed Merton’s conscience. Lynch, channeling the quixotic hermit, offers some reliable guidance for recovering your right mind in a mad place, and making a world where the stranger is welcome.

In his erudite exegetical study “Thomas Merton and the ‘Edenic Office of the Poet’: Three Poems from *The Tears of the Blind Lions*,” **Patrick F. O’Connell** examines “three of the most effective poems” from this 1949 collection that “draw in different ways on one of the most powerful tropes for Merton throughout his career, both in verse and in prose, the return to paradise.” Though the collection was initially marketed as an appropriate Christmas gift, presumably spreading cheer, O’Connell reminds us that many of the poems in *TBL* are dark and dour. We come away with a renewed sense that Merton’s search for a paradise consciousness, even early on, was not simply driven by a desired *flight from* the world’s absurdities, but by an apprehension that freedom would be found by facing squarely and moving *through* the darkness of this fallen world.

Rounding out the collection of articles from conference presentations we have **Christopher Pramuk**’s “Merton on the Dark Side of the Moon: Points for Meditation and Deep Listening inside a Darkened Space.” This is the only submitted piece in this volume that originated as a guided workshop presentation rather than as a paper. In keeping with Berger’s call, then, it stands out as a little weird against the rest. By retaining the format of the original, so the reader can notice the interspersed moments when music would play, Pramuk’s piece has the dual-purpose benefit of being utilized as a resource for scholarship or as what he calls an *auditio divina* companion to Pink Floyd’s legendary album. Either way, the piece, as with the others, moves through the darkness uncovering the fecund silence and the hidden growth.

The Merton Annual mainstays of a bibliographic review essay and

5. “A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants” (*ESF* 71; *CP* 373).

some seldom- or never-before published Merton material bookend the featured articles, and this volume begins with a collection of letters between **Thomas Merton** and **Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO**. Introducing the letters, Patrick O’Connell writes: “To commemorate the life of Br. Patrick . . . this year’s volume . . . includes the complete extant correspondence between these two Cistercian colleagues and friends.” While many, though not all, of Merton’s letters to Hart are available elsewhere in published, often somewhat abridged, format, none of Hart’s have previously appeared in print and O’Connell has put these letters together for our readers with a host of informative and explanatory notes. This delightful collection often seems eerily contemporary as the topics of racial injustice and Nixon’s election arise. Mostly, however, they reveal a deep and engaging friendship, now enjoyed even beyond the constraints of space/time.

Closing out the section of articles, and preceding the individual book reviews, **Deborah Pope Kehoe**’s “Thomas Merton in Connivance with Eternity” renders a substantive bibliographic overview of the Merton related literature published in 2018, the “golden anniversary of [Merton’s] entrance into eternity.” With hermeneutic skill and piquant prose Kehoe covers a range of materials that offer “a new opportunity to confirm the vitality of Merton’s legacy.” As you enjoy the articles offered here, may you be gently reminded, and consoled by the fact, that being in your “right mind” has little to do with being “perfectly adjusted.” The mad world needs the weird ones to bring back some real sanity.⁶

6. See Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 47.