

Introduction: The Many Faces of the Stranger

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“All the days of your life, keep the frame of mind of the stranger.”

Abba Agathon¹

The Seventeenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, held in June 2021, took its theme from the lines “Thou inward Stranger / Whom I have never seen,” found in the poem “Stranger” in Thomas Merton’s 1957 collection of poems *The Strange Islands*.² While the circumstances could not have been foreseen, as it turned out, this theme was especially appropriate, considering that the entire conference, for the first time in ITMS history, was conducted on-line, remotely, making, in a sense, strange islands of all participants. And while the concept of strangeness could generate meaningful presentations at an ITMS conference at any time, it seems particularly suitable for a year in which the global community continued to grapple with the irregularities of living through a pandemic, with all the novel challenges and opportunities that forced separation brings – as well as a year in which some not-so-unfamiliar plagues of the human condition persisted in distancing people from one another.

In keeping with *The Merton Annual* tradition, the articles section leads with an original piece by **Thomas Merton**, edited and introduced by **Patrick F. O’Connell**, entitled “On Remembering Monsieur Delmas,” a personal essay Merton wrote as a favor for Morris L. Ernst, an acquaintance who was soliciting from “influential people” tributes to memorable teachers for a book he was preparing. In his remembrance of a teacher from his days at the Lycée in Montauban, Merton pertinently writes, “Although I had been born in France, I was not really French” and recalls that “the French official mind” was not “congenial” to his “pensive and solitary humors.” M. Delmas stood out to the twelve-year-old Merton as an “exception[al]” Frenchman and as a caring teacher who understood that “the teacher exists for the student, not the other way around.” Apparently a rare authority figure, his “decent” and gentle style of teaching was able to cross boundaries to reach even the atypical pupils, such as young Merton.

1. “Life and Sayings of Holy Abba Agathon of Egypt”; available at: www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2010/03/saint-agathon-of-egypt.html.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957) 102.

The articles that follow, most of which originated as presentations at the ITMS Seventeenth General Meeting, offer a wide range of direct and indirect answers to the fertile question posed by the call for papers for the conference: “In Merton’s concern for human rights, and as a monk devoted to the charism of hospitality, in what ways did this person of privilege demonstrate how to be an ally, through self-identification with the outsider, to those externally labeled ‘the alien’ and ‘the stranger’?”³

The opening features, texts of two plenary addresses from the general meeting, are direct responses to the conference prompt. First, “The Inward Stranger” by **Bonnie Thurston** lays out some of the challenges of taking seriously the “ominous” presence of the “inward stranger” residing in all of us. Thurston fittingly concludes that Merton’s extensive writing on the True Self counsels our wounded world that “the healing begins within each one of us.” Second, in “Contemplation in Times of Crisis,” **Andrew Prevot** delivers a stimulating analysis of Merton’s writings on contemplation and concurs with Thurston that in Merton’s works, we find recognition that our world’s troubling divisions are rooted deeply in ourselves and will not be resolved without the inner transformation that only true contemplation (as opposed to self-absorbed “navel-gazing”) can effect. As one of many striking features of his paper, Prevot invokes Merton’s poignant expression of fraternal grief in the poem “For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943” to connect with the suffering wrought by “the brother-killing violence” of our world, such as that brought about by structural racism.

Continuing with the subject of the world’s brutal injustices stemming from malformed spiritual roots, the next three articles situate Merton within the fraught contexts of racism, colonialism and political oppression. On the subject of Merton and race, **Gordon Oyer**, in “Merton’s Path toward Writing on Racial Concerns,” ably traces the growth of Merton’s sensitivity to racial issues within his contemplative vocation, from the seminal experiences to their fruition in his first publication on a race-related topic. Appended to Oyer’s article is the text of that first publication, “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom,” a response to an article in which James Baldwin was compared to Caliban, the half-human, half-beast character in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, enraged by the efforts of the colonizers of his island home to educate and civilize him.

Such presumptuous attitudes and actions towards indigenous populations is the subject of “Après Kamloops, le Déluge: Institutional Church, Indigenous Oppression and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” by **Michael W.**

3. “CALL FOR PRESENTATIONS: Seventeenth General Meeting,” *The Merton Seasonal* 44.4 (Winter 2019) 27.

Higgins. Originally a talk delivered at the Centre for Christian Engagement at St. Mark's College, University of British Columbia (of which Higgins is President), the piece is in response to the recent horrifying discoveries on the grounds of what once were Canadian boarding schools run by orders of the Roman Catholic Church, schools in which First Nations children were forcibly enrolled, where they existed in deplorable conditions and in which many died and were buried in unmarked graves. Higgins asserts his intentions to show how the Catholic Intellectual Tradition could have engendered in church leadership a different approach ("the road not taken") from that of past authorities who allowed such atrocities to be enacted. Toward this end, Higgins presents Thomas Merton and John Moriarty as examples of how "the Catholic Intellectual Tradition speaks to other ways of co-existing, indeed, of co-flourishing." Higgins supports his remarks with plentiful references to Merton's prophetic writings such as *Ishi Means Man* and *The Geography of Lograire*.

Following up with a potent portrayal of how desperately wounded the world can be is "The Grey Face of the Other," in which **Christopher Pramuk** brings his notable familiarity with Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia* into a discussion of Melissa Raphael's wrenching Jewish feminist depictions of Auschwitz. By doing so, Pramuk creates an extraordinary frame for displaying Merton's "fiercely hopeful vision of God" in "persons too often ignored or crushed by our political and theological systems."

Offering a specific example of Merton's personal embrace of "the other" is "Up Close and Particular: Remembering Herman Hanekamp and Merton's Other Insights into Loving Strangers" by **Gary P. Hall**, who suggests that in addition to the celebrated recording of Merton's "pivotal" Fourth and Walnut epiphany, one would do well to reflect, as Hall has done, on additional, more particular, illustrations of Merton's insights into the sacred connectedness of humanity as noted in his journals. Hall writes: "What we might learn when we allow the many and varied fragments of Merton . . . to interact with one another and with us, is potentially revelatory, informative and transformative." For his primary example, Hall points to Merton's journal entries on the death and funeral of Herman Hanekamp, a neighbor and one-time resident of the monastery, whose preference for an independent life of solitude had left him "revealingly estranged" from the monastic community.

Focusing on what might be considered for its time an unusual openness to serious dialogue with marginalized persons – in this case, women – **James Robinson**, in "The Age of Rosemary's: Thomas Merton's Engagement with Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Haughton," presents numerous details about the interactions between Merton and the

two female theologians who share, among other traits, the same first name.

The next articles direct attention to what Merton off-handedly referred to as “the Eastern thing,” a phrase with which **John Marshall** launches a substantive exploration of Merton’s attractions to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Motivated by Merton’s influence on ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, Marshall asserts at the outset that he intends to address what he interprets as a “distorted appreciation” of Merton’s interest in Eastern religions and to offer a more expansive view of Merton’s Asian interreligious encounters.

In complement and contrast, **Huili S. Stout**, in “Thomas Merton and the Difficulty of Interreligious Dialogue,” also points out Merton’s receptivity to various Eastern religious traditions. Unlike Marshall, however, Stout submits that Merton’s ecumenical example has not yet taken hold in mainstream Catholic culture, possibly because Merton’s distinctive rhetorical style could be misinterpreted as promoting an individualist spirituality.

The following two features consider Merton as monastic artist interacting with and reflecting aspects of the world beyond the cloister. Focusing specifically on Merton the poet, “Merton’s Strange Archipelago: Poetic Responses to a Prosaic Journey” by **Patrick F. O’Connell** examines three Merton poems: the first, “Visit to Louisville,” is an early unpublished work that Merton later reused in varying degrees in two published poems: “The City after Noon” and “How to Enter a Big City.” Through a magnificent explication of the three works, O’Connell demonstrates how a close reading reveals significant differences and similarities among the poems, all connected by their subject of Merton in relation to the city in general, Louisville in particular. O’Connell concludes that the connection can be envisioned as “an archipelago charting the stages of evolution of Merton’s attitude toward the world.”

Robert Weldon Whalen in “Noir, Hip, Beat, Cool: Thomas Merton and the Postwar, Trans-Atlantic, Existentialist Avant-Garde” also addresses Merton as artist, here viewed in a much wider frame. Writing that Merton was “not an artist who existed in some abstract universe but an artist who inhabited the strange world of the postwar, existentialist, trans-Atlantic avant-garde,” Whalen goes on to illustrate how Merton’s inclusive imagination incorporated many of the edgier cultural trends of his lifetime in his artistry and his spirituality.

Suitably positioned as the last of the articles, “Are We There Yet? Thomas Merton as Experience, Text and Event” by **Fred W. Herron** addresses the periodic need for the entity known as Merton studies to ask, “Where are we, and where do we go now?” For an organization

dedicated to promoting Thomas Merton's legacy as ever-meaningful to an ever-changing world, these are reasonable and even essential questions. And while Merton devotees in need of new spiritual touchstones⁴ may be reconsidering the place of Thomas Merton in their individual lives, the trenchant searching generated by such questions as "Are we there yet?" and "Is it time to let Merton go?" nevertheless suggests the sustained vigor of his influential presence in a world that would in many ways be strange to him today. Borrowing the language of Joseph Komonchak's retrospectives on Vatican II, Herron proposes that one valuable approach to a collective re-envisioning of Thomas Merton's relevance is to shift the view away from Merton as monk and writer, to Merton as "experience, text and event." In his open-ended conclusion, Herron cleverly employs an historical allusion, as he both defers the original question and implicitly answers it at the same time.

As is customary, the features segment culminates with a bibliographic review of Merton-related books and articles published in the previous year, when, along with the global community in 2020, Merton studies also moved into areas of heretofore unexplored territory. "Extending the Frontier" surveys an ample selection of the year's publications, with notes as to how these scholarly and popular items demonstrate the applicability of Merton's thought to even the most daunting issues of contemporary life.

Conclusion

Not wishing to enter the thicket of cultural theory which obliges us to question much of what we think we know about language, I will simply (naively?) say that I am in awe of the mysterious power of words, particularly of the noun, that "part of speech" which, as many of us were taught, "names a person, place or thing." To my way of thinking, words that *name* have a superpower. After all, to name is to acknowledge – and that is the beginning of relationship, perhaps one of love, as the poet Robert Penn Warren suggests.⁵ The term "stranger," a central focus of the studies that make up this volume, is an exceptional naming word – intriguingly contradictory in that its denotative function is to signify the unknown. Its connotative dimensions go even further into the belly of a paradox where the word can evoke emotions anywhere from terror to

4. See, for example, the poignant reflection by Merton documentarian Cassidy Hall, "Maybe It's Time for Me to Let Go of Thomas Merton," *The Christian Century* (6 December 2021); available at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/maybe-it-s-time-me-let-go-thomas-merton>.

5. "What is love? / One name for it is knowledge," in Robert Penn Warren, "Love and Knowledge," *Audubon: A Vision* (New York: Random House, 1969) 30.

ecstasy. With such compelling ambiguity, “stranger” is a word, as Emily Dickinson might say, “to tip your hat to.”⁶

Its versatility is found in many forms of our culture’s arts and entertainments. Memorable examples include Billy Joel’s 1977 song “The Stranger,”⁷ which, in presto tempo, catalogues the varieties of masks people “try on” in their relationships with others. A heftier example is the 1961 sci-fi novel by Robert Heinlein with its biblical title *Stranger in a Strange Land*,⁸ once banned for its provocative portrayal of social conventions as seen through alien eyes, now an iconic work of counter-cultural questioning of established norms. Going back a few centuries, one finds an exquisite use of the word in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “Frost at Midnight,”⁹ in which “the stranger” is not a person, but a thing, a film on a fireplace grate, a natural phenomenon imbued with supernatural significance, a sign presaging the arrival of someone as yet unknown, an appearance not feared, rather, hoped for by a lonely exile – who could be any of us.

More to the point, as the theme of the Seventeenth General Meeting of the ITMS underscores, Thomas Merton’s oeuvre also resounds with references to “the stranger.” From his exclamation of discovery on the streets of Louisville that “there are no strangers,”¹⁰ to the recognition of his own perceived separateness in *Day of a Stranger*,¹¹ Merton taps into the mystical irony of this noun in all its variant manifestations and finds that in a world where humanity dwells in dynamic tension between alienation and communion, the only way to true integration is to acknowledge with compassion the stranger without and the one within. From numerous angles, the articles in this volume of *The Merton Annual* unfold multiple illustrations of that prophetic wisdom. May you find pleasant reading within the following pages, and may it lead you to places you have never been before.

6. From William Luce, *The Belle of Amherst: A Play Based on the Life of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1978).

7. Billy Joel, “The Stranger” on *The Stranger* (Columbia Records, 1977).

8. Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: George Putnam’s Sons, 1961).

9. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight,” in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) 422.

10. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.

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