

Merton through a Feminine Lens

Review of

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If one looks at broad descriptions of feminist spirituality, it is clear that the title of Victor Kramer's introductory essay for Volume 14 of *The Merton Annual*, "Merton's Openness to Change and his Foreshadowing of a Feminist Spirituality" (7-11) is well chosen. Receptivity to change and growth, yearning for God, falling in love, a keen desire to make connections, intimacy, birth, the capacity to see one's environment as a home and oneself as homemaker, a sense of hospitality, an awareness of the cycles of nature and even restlessness with the way one's life has been defined, are all common "threads" in feminist spirituality. These threads weave a tapestry of colors and moods in the collection of writings gathered by editor Kramer.

In the light of so many complex and surprising turns recorded in Merton's later journals (*Dancing in the Water of Life* and *Learning to Love*), Kramer's hunch that collecting new essays "about Merton and the feminine" would cast light on his "apparent need to integrate basic aspects of his personhood" (8) is on the mark. From the outset it must be noted that this collection of primary sources and essays (even many of the reviews) have an inner coherence that is quite extraordinary in an annual volume of this kind. It is no coincidence that a deep hard look at those later writings and conversations reveal a Merton engaged in growth and change, deep friendships and an ardent desire for unity – a Merton in search of the true meaning of dedication, dialogue, care of the earth (and the connection to nuclear war) and a certain honesty about asking those deeper questions of identity. The authors and editors here have taken that deep hard look.

Initiating the collection with "Merton and Loretto: Background of Tape Recording" (12-13) by Jane Marie Richardson, SL, enables us to move quickly into Merton's "Comments about Religious Life Today" (14-32), an analysis of the present situation in religious life both for himself and for his dear and respected friends in that community as well as in the broader Church (Transcript of a recording made by and edited by Father Louis Merton for Special General Chapter Sisters of Loretto, 1967). Responding to a rough draft of what would become the new Loretto constitutions, Merton was asked for critique and suggestions. Richardson says that she believes that "Merton made the tape for us because he cared a great deal about Mary Luke [Tobin] and about all of Loretto" (13). Because the tape would be shared to the benefit of other groups of women religious, Richardson notes, "This, in turn, would open up to him a potential and legitimate avenue for being in contact with many

women, a genuine need in his life” (13).

In the opening remarks Merton mentions his usual concern that these thoughts are pulled together in haste and may be “haphazard” (14). However, he proceeds to give a sustained analysis of the word *dedication* in religious life and the real give and take with the community is indicated as he notes the difference in his own understanding and that which is found in the constitution draft – both of these in contrast to what Rome and the Sacred Congregation might mean by the word *dedication* (15). It is this struggle with and understanding of dedication that leads him into the discussion of authenticity in religious life today, the split between the secular and the sacred, friendship, concerns about mental illness in members, pressures in religious life, discipline and prayer. He concludes that as religious it is important to think in terms “of fidelity to one another, fidelity not just to the rule, to the system, the religious ideal, but to our common vocation and common task, the common value we have discovered living together, studying together, working together for a certain end” (32).

Merton’s own words on the tape set the stage for a deeper understanding of the twin themes of friendship and dedication and how these expressed themselves in his later life. Three pieces of particular importance here are: “‘A Journey into Wholeness’: An Interview about Thomas Merton with Myriam Dardenne at Redwoods Monastery” (conducted by Christine M. Bochen with Victor A. Kramer; edited by Christine M. Bochen) (33-55); “‘The Best Retreat I Ever Made’: Merton and the Contemplative Prioresses” by Bonnie Bowman Thurston (81-95); and “With Love in the Lord: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether” by Dorothy LeBeau (96-120).

Bochen and Kramer have done a first-rate job of bringing forth Sr. Myriam Dardenne’s “*impressions and memories*” (33) of Merton during a visit she made to Gethsemani and two trips that he made to Redwoods monastery in California. (This interview is even more dear in that Sr. Myriam has died quite recently.) Bochen gently invites a more autobiographical approach in the interview that includes a great insight into Sr. Myriam’s earlier life and this, in turn, reveals the beautiful person that Merton encountered. Both Kramer and Bochen raise the question of the distinction between “Merton and women” and “Merton and the feminine” (53). The response reveals important insights into friendship as well as some reflections on Jungian psychology. In the end what comes through is a real sense of these brief, but very intense visits, and Sr. Myriam’s astute summary of Merton’s legacy. Victor Kramer’s concern for getting at the more complex elements of Merton’s personhood is addressed clearly in this interview.

Bonnie Thurston summarizes a retreat given by Merton at Gethsemani in 1967 to a group of contemplative prioresses. As in the Loretto tape the emphasis was on the renewal of religious life and “[s]pecial attention was given to vocation, forms of commitment and prayer, and to the social issues of the day” (81). Thurston rightly emphasizes the context of the retreat, which was Merton’s relationship with “M” and his correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether – both formative experiences in the background of this first meeting with contemplative prioresses (82). Paying attention to this intellectual and emotional context highlights ever more clearly the deep interconnections in Merton’s spiritual search for wholeness in these very different relationships with women in his life at that time. Thurston does a real service to this volume by taking such care to connect Merton’s writings, his friendships and this kind of retreat work/spiritual direction that reveal insights into his own vocation and that shared “ground of silence” among contemplatives which he said “is always there” (95).

Dorothy LeBeau's article on the Merton-Ruether correspondence examines the ultimate challenge of the validity of monastic life in the contemporary world that Ruether raised in the midst of their exchange between 1966 and 1968. The work is introduced with biographical notes about both correspondents and then a kind of narrative approach to the letters enables LeBeau to weave together themes, persons and events. In her selections and analysis she remains quite faithful to the larger body of material comprising forty letters (*At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995]).

"The Wilderness of Compassion: Nature's Influence in Thomas Merton's Writing," by Monica Weis, SSJ (56-80), sounds a warning to those who would tend to oversimplify the vocabulary of feminism. Sorting through some of the multiple perspectives within feminist discourse, Weis uncovers the aspects of connectedness and interdependence, nurture and healing, as well as compassion which leads to action (all part of the ecofeminist agenda) (56). She notes Merton's interest in and correspondence with Rachel Carson and his growth in an understanding of the connection between environmental consciousness and nuclear war. Weis' work is well organized and provides a good grounding for looking at the several articles on Merton's poetry. For this reason it might have been well to have placed it after the Thurston article as a good reflection on the previous material and a gateway into the focus on poetry. This is more a matter of personal preference since many readers pick up a journal such as this one and do not necessarily move through it in sequence.

Andrea C. Cook, in "The Experience of Romantic Transcendence in Thomas Merton's *Eighteen Poems*" (121-54), takes a new look at Merton's poetry through important themes in feminist spirituality including his own reference to birth and the "interdependent process between mother and child" (121). She sees this as key to understanding "romantic transcendence, and Merton's relationship with 'M'" (121-22) as she examines his "poetic release" in *Eighteen Poems*. Cook uses Rosemary Haughton's encounters with Merton, in reading and in person (although brief), to open up those themes of conversion and rebirth found in Haughton's theory of "romantic breakthrough." In the last two sections of her article, Cook explores Merton's "Proverb dream, integration and obedience" (121).

"A Gallery of Women's Faces and Dreams of Women From the Drawings and Journals of Thomas Merton," by Jonathan Montaldo (155-72), encourages looking at Merton through his "autobiographical art" which "threatens incidences of being changed, of wanting to lead a different, deeper kind of life" (155). What we have here is a "gallery" to move through reflectively. There is no attempt to analyze (blessedly), but only a simple, imaginative rendering of fragments from journals and poems (*Hagia Sophia*) juxtaposed to the drawings. The "foreshadowing of a feminist spirituality" which is the general theme of this volume becomes tangible in Montaldo's offering here. The work provides a good companion piece to his recent book: *Dialogues with Silence, Prayers & Drawings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001).

Merton's epiphany at Fourth and Walnut is at the center of Susan McCaslin's article, "Merton and Blake: The Heretic Within and the Heretic Without" (173-83). She sees the "deeply layered" text (in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*) and all of Merton's references to it, "delineating a moment of awakening in [his] life and writing" (173). Further, McCaslin, shows how the text "resonates deeply with the imagery and mystical concepts of Merton's great mentor and predecessor in the tradition of mystical poetry, William Blake" (173). In a valuable comparison of the earlier and later versions of the text of Fourth and Walnut, McCaslin examines both the notion that Merton, though a monk, "is

one with common humanity” (180), and the more Blakean notion of the “divine center within each person” (181). Her analysis of the more critical and “anti-institutional” strains in both poets serves to highlight their movement toward compassion, creativity, and a sense of the interconnection of all of life. All of these themes resonate with feminist spirituality.

Malgorzata Poks takes on a book-length task in her study, “Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons” (184-222). Her contention is that “the entire body of Thomas Merton’s poetry shows surprising consistency, and that even his late anti-poetry of indignation and protest should be seen in terms of an evolutionary development rather than the sometimes-postulated rupture” (184). When Merton claimed in his early life that “geography has lost all earthly north,” Poks is able to show the tedious task of “an eventual rebuilding of his geography, a reorientation, not rejection, of his map” (222). What makes this article work is that it gives one a compressed sense of Merton’s “geography” with all of the adjustments made to the map (as well as giving a look at other cartographers that may have influenced him). Looking more in depth at the poetry itself may be left for the book-length version but this more organic way of viewing the corpus of Merton’s poetry is an important contribution to Merton Studies.

The bibliography review essay, “Inertia, Idiosyncrasy and Incubation: The Range of Current Merton Studies” by George Kilcourse, Jr. (223-43), provides a critical look into the present state of Merton Studies so important for those engaged in Merton scholarship. Kilcourse raises a serious challenge: “How can we expand the conversation beyond the margins of the relatively tight circle of critical commentators in Merton Studies?” (242). While delivering careful reviews of the major works over the past year, Kilcourse points us toward a promising future for the broader, more interreligious and intercultural programs, papers and studies forthcoming. He sounds a call for creativity “when it comes to reflection (and solidarity) in terms of the spirituality, culture, and social issues affecting developing nations and our own Western world’s spiritual hungers vis-à-vis Merton’s enduring gifts” (243) – an important challenge as we move ahead in the twenty-first century.

The *Annual* concludes with thirteen reviews of recent publications either of Merton materials (including Arthur W. Biddle’s edition of the Merton-Lax correspondence, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, and *Thomas Merton: Writings Selected With an Introduction by Christine M. Bochen*) or works directly related to such topics as monastic spirituality, poetry and non-violence (244-77).

The topic of “Merton’s Openness to Change and his Foreshadowing of a Feminist Spirituality” is taken seriously by the contributors and the editor of this volume. The time had come for bringing the scholarship together around this theme and the editorial work of Victor A. Kramer along with the careful preparation of the contributors, deserve a round of applause.