

The Matrix Revisited, Merton Style

Review of

The Merton Annual: Volume 15

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Reviewed by **Robert Grip**

The play on words in the title of this review is more than an attempt to get you to read it. It is a plea for all of you who have benefited from reading Thomas Merton over the years to reach out to a new generation that, sadly enough, does not treasure reading for pleasure as much as many of us did. In recent years, reading has lost ground as a favorite pastime, at least for Americans. Without all of us playing a part in introducing young people to Merton, periodicals such as *The Merton Annual* and even the *Seasonal*, which you are now reading, will slowly fade away with the “baby boomer” generation. For those of us who have already been introduced to Merton’s works, *The Merton Annual* continues to be a means to explore our interest in greater depth as it bridges the gap between the shorter articles that appear here in the *Seasonal*, and other published works. I have chosen to highlight just a few of the contributions that make the current issue of the *Annual* another valuable resource.

As the editor of volume 15, George A. Kilcourse, Jr., notes in his introduction, the edition offers a “matrix of issues” (10) that enables the reader to view Merton from many different angles, and provides additional proof that Merton’s social critique is still valid and relevant today. No better example can be found in the *Annual* than Gray Matthews’ essay, “The Healing Silence: Thomas Merton’s Contemplative Approach to Communication” (61-76). He correctly notes that the proliferation of personal communications devices has made it nearly impossible to experience the healing offered by silence – a power Merton experienced firsthand and encouraged others to seek. Consider the prophetic truth of Merton’s observation from 1961, when applied to contemporary life today. Matthews quotes from *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

The constant din of empty words and machine noises, the endless booming of loudspeakers end by making true communication and true communion almost impossible. Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn’t care, he doesn’t hear, he doesn’t think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk, he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés (63).

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We, like nature itself, abhor a vacuum. As Matthews notes, we are filling our silence with noise, rather than true communication.

When Merton chose to communicate with others, he often attempted to use the correspondent's own language. In her essay, "A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton" (136-54), Virginia Bear uses a generally accepted linguistic standard to examine Merton's level of proficiency in the 18 languages he either used or mentioned in his works.

One of the literary devices which might be mistaken for a language, "macaronic language," is explored by Johan Seynnaeve in "Language Mixture in a Macaronic Poem of Thomas Merton" (155-65). Macaronic is a deliberate mixture of language, which Merton used playfully in correspondence with his good friend, Bob Lax. This essay, however, explores the meaning of Merton's poem, "*Mens Sana in Corpore Sano: Macaronic Lyric*," written when he was teaching English at St. Bonaventure College.

The *Annual* also offers an insightful essay on Robert Lax, "'Bringing the Earth to Flower': A Tribute to Robert Lax (1915-2000); Poet, Pilgrim, Prophet" (23-60), by Jeannine N. Mizingou. She explores Lax's popularity in Europe (lamenting his lack of recognition in the United States), his role as a prophet, and the extent to which his Christianity is expressed in his poem, *The Circus of the Sun*.

Lynn Szabo examines Merton's anti-poetry, in "'Hiding the Ace of Freedoms': Discovering the Way(s) of Peace in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*" (103-20), as an example of Merton's rebellious nature, wrestling not only with the structures in place within the monastery and the Church, but also his own internal demons.

The editor's long-form interview with Brother Paul Quenon (210-31) offers not only wonderful insight into Merton as a teacher, but also into how his presence influenced those, like Quenon, who were his students. The *Annual* should be applauded for preserving the voices and the memories of Merton's contemporaries, and for offering an important forum for the work of those who continue to be touched by Merton's life and his work.