

A Selection of Substance

Review of

Selected Essays

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO

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Reviewed by **Dana Greene**

Patrick F. O'Connell, professor of English and theology at Gannon University, is well-known to readers of *The Merton Seasonal*. Editor of this journal, of numerous books by Merton, co-author of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* and former president of the International Thomas Merton Society, O'Connell's scholarly reputation is well-established. What is open to question is whether after forty-five years of mining Merton's extensive literary corpus another Merton book is relevant. Relevance in this case means that some new insight is gained from a particular organization and contextualization of material, all of which has in one form or another been previously published.

During his lifetime Merton wrote more than two hundred and fifty essays. *Selected Essays* is a compendium of thirty-three of these, arranged chronologically and preceded by a foreword by Patrick Hart, Merton's former secretary, and an introduction by O'Connell in which he lays out the volume's rationale, namely to offer a representation of the breadth and depth of Merton's work as an essayist, a complement to existing volumes of Merton's poetry, letters and journals. Although on the most obvious level *Selected Essays* is a work of documentation illustrating Merton's skill as an essayist, there are at least three other ways in which the volume has significance.

First, the book has a substantial, but unobtrusive, scholarly apparatus. It contains a chronological bibliography of all Merton's essays produced between 1939 and 1968, including posthumous publications. The selected essays are highlighted in the bibliography so that each can be seen within its literary context. There is a second bibliography which lists books in which his essays appear and a list of his books cited in the essays themselves. Each of the thirty-three essays is preceded by an introduction which includes notes on the writing of the essay and its publication history. If an essay had footnotes, those are included as well. This bibliographic apparatus will be of particular interest to scholars who will welcome this complex detail.

Second, both the scholar and the general reader will appreciate Merton's interest in a great variety of subjects, most prominently monastic life and its renewal, solitude, spiritual direction,

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Christianity's dialogue both with culture and with other world religions, war, peace, racial justice, environmental issues, education and his particular interest in three literati, namely Pasternak, Faulkner and Camus. The reader cannot help but be impressed by the range of Merton's interests, each of which is examined through the lens of his monastic commitment and dealt with in a robust, engaged and prophetic voice that does not suffer fools lightly, be they in the monastery, the church or society. As O'Connell points out, Merton often wrote to find out what he himself thought about a particular subject. The result is writing which is exploratory but also vivid and convinced. These essays demonstrate not only the depth and breadth of Merton's writing, but the interconnected links among the topics he examines.

Third, and perhaps most interesting for the general reader, these essays reveal Merton's psychological and spiritual development over almost two decades. In this sense they are autobiographical. As O'Connell notes, there is a shift in Merton's writing between the 1940s and 1950s and the last ten years of his life. Although his interest in the contemplative life *per se* continues throughout the whole of this period, it is emphasized more directly in his earlier essays. The last decade of his writing illustrates both his increased engagement with pressing social issues and his willingness to have his work appear in other than strictly Catholic publications, such as *The Hudson Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Harper's* and *Holiday*. This shift resulted from the curtailing of earlier censorship by Cistercian authorities, the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council, Merton's own expanding intellectual interests, and his broadening contacts with artists, writers and publishers of all sorts. *Selected Essays* clearly reveals both Merton's pervasive interest in contemplative life and how that life implies engagement in the world.

The volume's first several essays, those written in the 1950s, conjure up the pre-Vatican II world in which monks before dawn offer their solitary Masses, seeking God independent of fellow believers, a world in which the principal monastic dedication was to be removed from the world. Yet even in these early essays, the reader catches glints of Merton's diverse commitments as he explores the poetry of John of the Cross, the novels of Boris Pasternak, and the writings of the Japanese scholar of Zen, D. T. Suzuki. By 1960, drawing on the insights of Suzuki, Paul Tillich and Jacques Maritain, Merton argues for a theology of "authentic creativity" which allows one to participate in divine creativity by renewing the face of the earth. In the first years of the 1960s, seeking a "catholicity" of interests, Merton investigates Taoist and Confucian texts, critiques the actions of the Soviet Union and the United States, and calls for Christian responsibility for nuclear disarmament. In other essays he lauds Gandhian non-violence, condemns Christians for their failure to adequately respond to racial injustice, and encourages poets to resist using their gifts for narrow ideological purposes.

The final essays of this volume give witness to Merton's commitment both to pursue traditional questions of the contemplative vocation and to critique the world from that perspective. He writes on apophatic prayer, pilgrimage as symbol of both the outer and the inner journey, the wisdom of the desert fathers, and spiritual direction. At the same time he confronts both the evils and the needs of contemporary society. He condemns the culture of positivistic scientism and the dehumanizing of Native Americans and argues for education as a search for authentic self-realization and for the importance of developing an ecological conscience.

Two essays of his last years are particularly illustrative of Merton's late development. "Is the World a Problem?" (1966) is one of his most well-known. In it he rejects a dualistic worldview which forces an either/or response and argues that one must "choose the world," that the Christian vocation was to "make the world better, more free, more just, more livable, more human" (336). This was possible because there was the same ground of love in everything. To "choose the world" with all its anguish was to choose Christ. In the 1968 essay "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy'" Merton reviews A. Reza Arasteh's book *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*, which draws on both the Sufi tradition and the humanistic psychotherapeutic traditions of Viktor Frankl and Erich Fromm. Because Arasteh's work aimed at inner transformation of consciousness Merton believed it might be helpful in monastic renewal. For Merton full spiritual development usually included a form of psychological integration which emerged from an embrace of all of life and gave a unified vision of reality. That integration allowed a person to bring spontaneity and freedom into the lives of others. In the past, such integration was the privilege of the few but it was now a possibility for the many. Merton's lament was that while such integration had always been a goal of monasticism, it was not being realized. Unless renewed by the Spirit, the cloistered life would continue to stymie monastic vocation. He writes: "The result is that for many authentic vocations today the monastery has become merely a way station. To stay in the cloister for life would be to renounce their full development. And yet there is no guarantee that by leaving it they will develop any better" (461). The reader is left with the unanswerable question: if Merton had lived, what course would he have chosen?

"Is another book on Merton needed?" The answer is yes, if in fact it is one like *Selected Essays*. One only regrets its price.