

## Thomas Merton and the Old Verities

Review of

*Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classical Literature*

By Thomas Merton

Introduction by Michael W. Higgins

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013

([www.NowYouKnowMedia.com](http://www.NowYouKnowMedia.com))

11 Conferences on 5 CDs

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Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

As I write this review, it's late July, and once again, as a longtime resident of Oxford, Mississippi, I note the arrival of many visitors who have come to the University to attend the annual Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha Conference, some of them for the forty-first time. These visitors, much like those who attend ITMS General Meetings, represent diverse points of origin and levels of interest in the celebrated author. Although this conference, as the preeminent venue for Faulkner scholarship, attracts world-class academics, many people come simply because they enjoy talking and hearing about Faulkner. Expressly for such participants, a "Faulkner on the Fringe" session was established some years ago in the conference schedule, a lively open-mike event where Faulkner-inspired creativity, nostalgia and theory are allowed to run free – for ten minutes per speaker.

As I listened to Merton's recorded conferences on Faulkner and Classical Literature, I gained a new appreciation for these Faulkner pilgrims, a deeper understanding of what compels them to make this journey, including – maybe *especially* – those whose names never appear on the conference program in the role of scholar. Thomas Merton's inimitable teaching style, showcased in an insightfully arranged series of talks, reinvigorated in me the source of Faulkner's common appeal, namely, his commitment to those values that he identifies in his Nobel Prize Acceptance speech: love, honor, pity, pride, compassion and sacrifice.

The combination of the case cover's prominently displayed images of Merton and Faulkner and a review of the titles of the enclosed five CDS seems to belie the integrity of this collection. Of the five CDs, only Discs 3-5 focus exclusively on works by Faulkner, while Discs 1 and 2 contain the following lectures: "The Present State of Poetry [in 1966]," "A Classical Consciousness," "Eliot on Milton: What is a Classic?" and "The Classical Outlook." But the introduction by Michael W. Higgins provides a connection. Higgins emphasizes that it was Faulkner "the universalist," with his "classical sensibilities" and rendering of the "superiority of the *sapiential* way of knowing," that drew Merton

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**Deborah Kehoe** lives in Oxford, Mississippi and teaches English composition, world literature and professional writing at Northeast Community College and the University of Mississippi. She is a regular presenter at Merton Society conferences and has contributed articles and reviews to both *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Seasonal*.

to Faulkner. Ultimately, it makes sense, then, this bringing together into one package these parts: Merton's explanation of the cultural role of literary art to counter the pernicious effects of provincialism on language and thought; his equating a classical mentality with an awareness of history, a belief in cosmic harmony, and an appreciation of ageless values; his survey of classical writers throughout literary history; and, finally, his analysis of Faulkner's "The Bear," *The Wild Palms* and *The Sound and the Fury* to illustrate how Faulkner's rich regional fiction, while not explicitly Christian, reveals timeless spiritual wisdom and can therefore be read as meditations on immutable truths.

These recordings have much to offer every kind of Merton enthusiast. Those who delight in Merton's humor (and who doesn't?) will not be deprived. His apparent enjoyment of his own wit makes for additional levity, as he reads his favorite lines from his own anti-poetry, for example; tells a Groucho Marx joke in the context of explaining how T. S. Eliot contrived to disallow Milton "membership in the club" of Classicists; or digresses from a discussion of Milton's depiction of Heaven to muse hopefully that the dancing in Heaven will include the Conga.

For those with literary backgrounds or interests, the conferences provide hours of continuing education as Merton the English teacher tutors his novices with Socratic efficacy: "Who can name a Classical author?" and "Name the Great American Novelists," for example. His thoughtful evaluation of each response ("Hemingway? Oh, noooo!") reveals his considerable knowledge and passion for the subject in which he was formally trained.

As entertaining as these discourses on art and literature are, however, listeners are reminded often that the occasion for the talks is the edification of young men studying to become monks. And nowhere in these recordings is that purpose more clear than in Merton's analyses of Faulkner. For instance, in his discussion of "The Bear," Merton points out how the bear, while not a symbol of God exactly, represents the mysterious presence of God, and how young Ike McCaslin's entering the forest in pursuit of the bear only after laying down his watch, compass and gun can be read as a symbol of the contemplative path (an idea that Merton develops in his essay "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner").

In his talk on *The Wild Palms* (creatively misspelled on the CD label as *The Wild Psalms!*), Merton focuses on the contrast between the two stories that comprise the novel, a contrast in their treatment of life and death. The first, "Old Man," with allusions to Genesis and Isaiah and images of fecundity, birth and harmony amid apparent chaos, offers "an eschatological vision." The second, "The Wild Palms," with its depiction of a botched abortion, exposes the deadly consequences of a worldview that Merton calls "the faith of modern man," a misplaced belief in the superiority of one's earthly desires and in purely technological solutions to any perceived obstacles to their fulfillment. In response, Merton exclaims, "That's not the way to live!" and extols Faulkner for illustrating the "shallowness" and "stupidity" of this lifestyle. Here, Michael Higgins' introductory comment regarding Merton's appreciation of Faulkner's *sapiential* vision clearly applies.

Finally, Merton's spirited reading from *The Sound and the Fury* (complete with mildly distracting attempts at reproducing Faulkner's transcription of African-American dialect) presents the character of Dilsey, illiterate house servant for the complex Compson family, as a saint. With her "deeper understanding of time, . . . special capacity for pity," and belief that all she needs to do to enter Heaven is to answer "I's here" when her name is called, she is, according to Merton, a "perfect statement" of what it means to be a Christian – "identity as response."

I confess that, prior to my listening to these recordings as they are arranged in this series, Faulkner's venerated litany of universal truths had become so familiar to me that its resonance had diminished, along with the intensity of my response to the power of his fiction to evoke those "old verities." But after playing these five CDs multiple times over several months, I was surprised to discover that the voice of Thomas Merton (liberally seasoned by his laughter, his intelligence, his faith and his favorite punctuation mark, "see") had re-awakened and re-introduced me to the literary expansiveness and spiritual profundity of William Faulkner.