

The Thick and Thin of It

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 29

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Reviewed by **Nass Cannon**

In his artful introduction to the latest *Merton Annual* (7-14), Joseph Raab observes that many of the articles have “thick descriptions” and relate to “thin places” (7-8). The anthropological term thick description refers to studies in which authors are so viscerally immersed in their subject’s content that illuminative and meaningful insights are generated. Thin places, a term associated particularly with Celtic studies, refer to those geographical regions where heaven and earth appear close to one another, such as at pilgrimage sites. In writing about his experiences, Merton reveals such thin places in his descriptions of his epiphanies at Fourth and Walnut and at Polonnaruwa. However, it is of greater import that he daily breathed the atmosphere of a thin place at Gethsemani, realizing that “paradise is all around us” (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* 118). Certainly there are distinct geographical places where great spiritual events have transpired and many pilgrims savor the afterglow of lingering spiritual energy there, but the enduring message of Thomas Merton is that all of creation is a thin place for those with eyes to see. Indeed, much of his writing is directed to the recovery of those eyes by the restoration of an innocent and pure heart. Although everyone may not agree with this perception of thin places, surely everyone agrees that Merton, as one totally immersed in the vast array of his interests, provided thick descriptions. Similarly, the contributors to this volume of the *Annual* provide thick descriptions in their essays, some of which resulted from former editor David Belcastro’s inspiration to focus the issue on physical spaces, many of which are thin places.

The contributors are clearly up to this thick and thin task. Paul M. Pearson’s “From Clairvaux to Mount Olivet: Thomas Merton’s Geography of Place” (58-71) weaves Merton’s sense of place into his personal identity. With the authority of thorough research, Pearson contrasts Merton’s youthful wanderings which reflect an aimless character to the stability of Gethsemani, which promoted his deep interior spiritual quest. The silence and solitude of Gethsemani brought together his identities as man, monk and mystic to become the deeply integrated person evident in his voluminous writings, such as the “Fire Watch” that concludes *The Sign of Jonas*. Kathleen M. Baker, in ““This Terrific Sense of Geography”: Spatial Thinking in Merton’s Journals” (72-79) considers Merton’s mental capacity for virtual geography and illustrates Merton’s use of spatial thinking in his journals. In

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this innovative essay, Baker suggests that Merton's use of spatial thinking allowed him to interpret his contemplative experiences and enabled him to communicate his experiences to others in concrete terms. However, unless the reader is well versed in this theory of learning, one should be prepared to spend some time reading and re-reading Baker's essay to benefit from this presentation of packed concepts. In "Thomas Merton, Wildness and the Sacramental Power of Place" (80-89), Jason M. Brown invites us to radically abandon our familiar concept of "wilderness" and in its place to substitute a concept of "wildness." In Brown's view, "wilderness" connotes a separate geographical space from which a person is alienated, while "wildness" could include such spaces but could also be those found in one's own backyard. In contrast to the notion of wilderness, his concept of wildness reflects a sacramental relationship of mankind to wild spaces, reminiscent for me of Merton's perspective expressed in *The New Man*, where Merton explains that as a consequence of the Incarnation, mankind joins Christ as the New Adam in a new creation. In "The Persistence of Harlem in the Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton" (90-98), Michael N. McGregor argues that Merton's brief two-week stay at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem grounded him in the feel, taste and smell of poverty to the extent that it was a vital part of his formation as a monk. McGregor expresses the view that as a consequence of concretely touching the face of poverty, Merton had a lifelong identification with the poor, amplified by his immersion in the gospel teachings and expressed through his many writings on social justice.

This volume of the *Annual* also includes analyses of poems centered on place. In "Trappists, Working – Trappists, Praying: The Earliest Monastic Poetry of Thomas Merton" (99-124), Patrick F. O'Connell peels back layers of meaning found in some of Merton's early poetry written shortly after his arrival at Gethsemani. In his scholarly dissection of these poems O'Connell connects them line-by-line to a vast array of facts and images while capturing Merton's almost euphoric enthusiasm for his new home. As Merton matured in his vocation, his relationship to place, space and cultural fixation broadened as illustrated in his comments on final integration. Monica Weis captures this element of Merton's expanding interests as she connects Merton to Irish hermit poetry in "Was Thomas Merton Merely Dabbling in Early Irish Poetry?" (125-44).

Integral to Merton's concept of final integration is the notion of going beyond one's own cultural identity and fixation on place. Michael Plekon explores this aspect of Merton in his "'What I Wear Is Pants. What I Do Is Live. How I Pray Is Breathe': Merton and the Spiritual Life in the Twenty-First Century" (145-58). Citing Jonathan Montaldo's perceptive insights into the life and struggles of Merton, Plekon explores Merton's unity of life including some of his struggles during the hermitage years, a time in which Merton lives an integrated ordinary life in an extraordinary way. Like us he wears pants, lives and breathes, but does so more like the ancient men of Tao or the early desert fathers who lived in deeper communion with their inner self and Reality. However, as one self-described as spiritually lost in God, Merton was certainly intellectually focused, as evidenced by Donald Grayston's article, "Public Intellectual, Democratic Dissenter: Thomas Merton on Nuclear Weapons" (159-79). Grayston convincingly traces the argument that Merton, even though censored by his order, articulated the gospel message of peace with its implications for the abolition of nuclear weapons and that his contribution had an effect on the thinking of several popes and on the Second Vatican Council.

Grayston also points us to one of Merton's self-declared missions, which was to undertake an apostolate of friendship with other intellectuals. Angus F. Stuart provides a concrete example of

such a friendship in his article, “Thomas Merton and Henry Miller: A Correspondence in Vision” (180-87). Although on the surface, these two appear to be radically different, one an apostle of the interior way to union with God and the other an apostle of the flesh and self-gratification, Stuart demonstrates their friendship, their similarities and their shared vision in their mature years as characterized in Miller’s words, “there are no limits to paradise” (186). “In Finding Our Way: Thomas Merton, John Wu and the Christian Dialogue with Early China” (188-202), Anthony E. Clark discusses the productive fruits of the friendship of Thomas Merton and John Wu in their understanding of Daoism. Although Clark believes their understanding of the Dao may have been flawed, he credits them among others with initiating an East-West dialogue through example. Inspired by his own friendship with his teacher Gabriel Moran, Padraic O’Hare explores “Young Adult Spiritual Lives: Merton, Moran and Monastic Resources” (203-20). He identifies several universal monastic values exemplified by the lives of the Benedictine monks of Weston Priory; he then shares through the testimonials of five young adults how the monks had an edifying effect upon them.

Two other pieces included in this volume capture Merton’s relationships with other monastics while presenting original and new information. Patrick F. O’Connell provides an introduction and edits the correspondence between Thomas Merton and the Benedictine nuns of the Abbey of Regina Laudis in “A Quite Exceptional Convent’: The Regina Laudis Correspondence” (15-37). The letters exchanged illumine a fruitful relationship between the nuns who admired the depth and breadth of his writings and Merton who reciprocated by admiring their monastery as one with “genuine life, and a human dimension” (25). A more oblique relationship to Merton occurs in the published interview of Charles Brandt conducted by Donald Grayston and David Chang in “A Single Sacred Community: An Interview with Charles Brandt – Hermit, Bookbinder, Ecologist” (38-57). In this charming transcription, which could have been lifted right out of a book about the desert fathers, the interviewers introduce us to Brandt, who met Merton in 1956. After spending nine years in a Trappist Monastery without taking final vows, Brandt found his way to a hermitage, a profession as a bookbinder, and a calling as a passionate ecologist.

This *Merton Annual* concludes with a bibliographic review of books written during Thomas Merton’s Centenary (2015). After a brief introductory overview by one of the editors (221-30), thirteen books by and about Merton are reviewed in detail (231-73). Clearly, through their scholarship, the authors of these books as well as their reviewers have entered into a deep relationship with the rhythm of Merton’s mind and heart. It is well worth the reader’s time to peruse the reviews of these books and we should all be grateful to the many reviewers for their donation of time and thoughtful attention. Gratitude should also be expressed to editors Deborah Pope Kehoe and Joseph Quinn Raab, for their scholarly and meticulous rendering of this edition. *The Merton Annual Volume 29* should appeal to anyone who wishes to explore Merton and his works from new perspectives and especially those who wish an intellectual challenge. Give yourself plenty of time to slowly digest these pages because there is a lot of thick and some thin in them.