Confronting Convention with Wisdom and Wit

Review of
The Merton Annual Volume 33
Edited by Deborah Pope Kehoe and Joseph Quinn Raab
Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2020
303 pages / $19.95 paper

Reviewed by **Padraic O'Hare**

In her introduction to volume 33 of *The Merton Annual*, entitled "Keeping the Faith and Keeping It Weird" (7-14), Deborah Kehoe cites Rose Marie Berger's essay "Direct Transmission of Faith" from volume 32, referring to Merton's "pilgrim soul" and urging us to "KEEP. MERTON. WEIRD" (7). "Keeping Merton Weird" put me in mind of Herb Gardner's 1960s play and film *A Thousand Clowns*, recalling the hilarious non-conformist figure of Murray Burns. Bidden to come back to reality, Murray says, "Only as a tourist!" Here is one of the things we love most about Merton, the rejection of conventional notions of reality and of conventional behaviors, and the embrace of a mystical way of behaving. As Merton wrote of the inner life, one of the places where Reality resides, there "can be no special planned technique for discovering and awakening one's inner self, because the inner self is, first of all, a spontaneity that is nothing if not free" (*Inner Experience* 6). This is the Merton encountered often in the twelve essays, the 2019 review essay and the nine reviews included in volume 33 – the spontaneous Merton of whom Cardinal Newman could have been speaking in the now boiler-plate, but certainly true adage, that to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often.

In "'The Pope of the Virgin Mary' and Other Uncollected Marian Writings" (15-62), Patrick F. O'Connell introduces two substantial mid-1950s essays along with two briefer texts, and we experience Merton's evolution from "an early emphasis on [Mary's] intercessory and mediatorial role to his growing recognition of her identity as sharer in the paschal mystery, 'simple and unassuming' . . . 'the most perfect expression of the mystery of the Wisdom of God'" (15-16).

In "Racism Is a White Problem: Thomas Merton, Whiteness and Racial Justice" (63-82), Daniel P. Horan, OFM provides a thorough overview of Merton's powerful condemnation of structural racism in articles from such works as *Seeds of Destruction* and *Faith and Violence*. He displays not only his own considerable scholarship and passion but also that of Robin DiAngelo and Bryan Massingale, pointing out as well the limitations of Merton's advocacy, including equivocation about the Civil Right Movement of his time and lapses into "white normativity" (79).

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Michael N. McGregor, author of the superb 2015 biography of Robert Lax, *Pure Act*, contributes “Making Ourselves Heard: Lessons from Thomas Merton’s Approach to Principled Dissent and Communal Renewal” (83-91). We hear and learn of Merton’s moral voice, his insistence that we “move from alienation toward community and wholeness . . . increase our awareness . . . reclaim and revitalize language . . . [and] participate actively in nonviolent resistance” (84).

The title of Bonnie Thurston’s essay “Murdering Judas: Reconciling the Contemplative and the Poet in Thomas Merton” (92-107) comes directly from the young Merton, who called his authorial self more generally “my double, my shadow, my enemy” (95). Happily, as Thurston makes clear, Merton’s study and writing on the Desert Christians (as she felicitously calls them) and their hesychastic striving for quiet and inner stillness, overcomes this dichotomy; Merton writes powerful poems and definitive works on contemplative practice. In the words of Yves Bonnefoy (as quoted in his *New York Times* obituary): “We are deprived through words of an authentic intimacy with what we are. . . . We need poetry, not to regain this intimacy, which is impossible, but to remember that we miss it and to prove to ourselves the value of those moments when we are able to encounter other people, or trees, or anything beyond words, in silence.”

Justin D. Klassen’s “Peace beyond Prose: Augustine and Merton on Creation’s Useless Speech” (108-24) is a hymn of ecological ethics, juxtaposing Merton’s critique of the “myth of the city,” especially as it appears in his superb “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” with its designation of the city as a realm of collective false consciousness, with Saint Augustine’s injunction “*God did not make letters of ink for you to recognize him in; he set before your eyes all these things he has made*. Why look for a louder voice? Heaven and earth cries out to you ‘God made me’” (119). Klassen writes: “Insects do not show up in earnings reports, and so we do not treat them as real” (121); yet quoting Dave Goulson, he notes: “Insects are at the heart of every food web, they pollinate the large majority of plant species, keep the soil healthy, recycle nutrients, control pests, and much more. . . . [W]e humans cannot survive without insects” (109). Insect “speech” is the useless speech! Klassen makes good use of the Book of Job, of Annie Dillard and of Charles Taylor, and ends by informing us of the work of the Kansas-based Land Institute in fighting agricultural practices that lead to “bare fields” (124).

With typical scholarly acumen, Patrick F. O’Connell’s “If Not for Luther? Thomas Merton and Erasmus” (125-46) both celebrates the great sixteenth-century humanist and surveys Merton’s appreciation for him. O’Connell frames Erasmus as “the first great modern advocate of biblical renewal” (125) and as a superb theologian who “insisted that genuine religious commitment must be distinguished from external pious practices” (131). Here O’Connell notes Erasmus’ influence on Merton, the latter likewise writing of the “relative unimportance of exterior observance when it is compared with the interior spirit” (131). Merton, O’Connell tells us, designated Erasmus a “soul friend” (126), honoring his “true piety, which flourishes only when the spirit spontaneously strives to grow in charity” (131-32). Speaking of the *Ratio Verae Theologiae*, Merton writes: “I am charmed by him. He reads so well, speaks with such clarity and sense, and is so full of the light of the Gospel” (132). Comparing Karl Rahner with Erasmus, Merton notes the latter’s subdued passion and the humor of his writing. The title comes from Merton’s comment that had he not been judged a crypto-Lutheran, Erasmus would be heralded today as a doctor of the church (see 132).

Christóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes gives us "Panentheism in Thomas Merton and Teilhard de Chardin: Finding God in All Things" (147-68). Both Merton and Teilhard reject pantheism, the idea that "God is everything, and everything is God" (148), as not leaving any room for "the mystery of divine transcendence" (148) and slighting the "personal aspects of God" (149). Both, says the author, accept the definition of panentheism that "God is present in everything and everything is present to God" (149). But Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes, though embracing panentheism, is thoughtful in his expression of the limitations of this or any other God-talk, especially of "falling into the trap of either absolute determinism or absolute free will when there is no longer a balance between the fundamental distinctions of Creator and creature" (149). He says of Merton's panentheism, "he leaves room in his mystical theology to experience the sacred manifesting of the transformative power in his or her innermost being through partaking in divine transcendence and in divine immanence" (164); and of Teilhard's, that he "brought together his passion for God and his passion for Mother Earth" (164), citing Teilhard's powerful prayer: "Matter, you in whom I find both seduction and strength" (165). Also of note in this essay is Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes' treatment of the shocking critique of Teilhard as a crypto-fascist, ignoring human suffering and embracing never-ending evolutionary progress. He cites George Kilcourse's 1993 book *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, enlisting Merton in criticizing Teilhard's over-optimism (see 159-60), and even more pointed recent efforts by John P. Slattery to link Teilhard to eugenics (see 160), sharply rebutted by John F. Haught.

It is not uncommon for the *Annual* to publish a genre of essay "Thomas Merton and So and So." These are often, as in the treatment of Merton and Erasmus and Merton and Teilhard in this volume, highly well-integrated. Every so often, however, this genre strains to make connections and is really about "So and So." So I approached reading Liana Gehl's "The Invisible Order of Grace: Pondering the Lives of Thomas Merton and Vladimir Ghika" (169-91) with skepticism, considering the effort to link them improbable. So did the author: "Thomas Merton and Vladimir Ghika never met. They were 42 years apart in age and lived on different continents. . . . their paths never crossed" (173). I stayed, that is I read on, to encounter a gracious, modest and genuinely pious – the word means devout or reverent – author and an essay that makes its case. And certainly, Vladimir Ghika's life and work are well worth knowing. He lived from 1873 to 1954; he was Romanian prince, who was later ordained a priest of the Roman Catholic Church. He lived in Paris until World War II, returning to Romania to "complete a project for lepers and other social and medical works" (176). After the war, with Romania in Soviet hands, he refused twice to leave his good works and escape with other members of the former royalty. He was imprisoned, tortured and died in prison in 1954. In Paris before the war, he and his friend Jacques Maritain "engaged in a wide-ranging apostolate . . . . they reached out to artists, intellectuals, exiles, lepers, proletarians and *chiffonniers* – the most destitute people of Paris" (176). He was beatified by Pope Francis in 2013. Gehl searches for coincidences about Merton and Ghika: they both knew Maritain and Louis Massignon; they were both converts (or transfers); Merton was buried on December 17, 1968; Ghika's body was reinterred the following day. But then she gets it: she opens *Run to the Mountain* and reads Merton: "Whose prayer made me first pray again to God to give me grace to pray? . . . perhaps some stranger in a subway, or some child" (190) – or Blessed Ghika! "Divine *oikonomia*" – God's economy, God handling things well and prudently, God's housekeeping through which God "reveals himself and communicates his life" (171).

Gray Matthews' "Merton and Decoloniality: Facing the Whole-World" (192-220) is a comprehensive tour of the literature of a vastly deeper elucidation and condemnation of the post-colonial crippling of former colonized peoples and countries than any prior anti-colonial literature contains. This new field is the "decoloniality" of the title. Further, Matthews hits upon a terrific method for asking and answering whether Merton would embrace decoloniality. He writes "For decolonial thinkers, the Modern World is a colonized world; colonialism is inseparable from modernity. Decolonial critics question and challenge the development over the last 500 years of a dominant, modern system of thought and action, a managerial system that is criticized for having suppressed, oppressed or eradicated other systems, cultures, languages and traditional ways of living on earth" (195). Thus, "formerly colonized cultures experienced great difficulty in gaining actual autonomy [in this] new globalized process of subjugation to a larger world-system, a veritable managerial system maintaining imperial control" (195). Matthews' profoundly simple method for asserting that Merton would be "on board" with decoloniality is to cite, without comment, seven texts of Merton which nail the author's thesis. For example, Matthews cites Merton's "deep concerns regarding issues of colonization" (201), and then this from *Faith and Violence*:

> The problem is much more complex, much more tragic, than people have imagined. . . . The guilt of white America toward the Negro is simply another version of the guilt of the European colonizer toward all the other races of the world, whether in Asia, Africa, America or Polynesia. . . . The contemplative way requires first of all and above all renunciation of this obsession with the triumph of the individual or collective will to power. For this aggressive and self-assertive drive to possess and to exert power implies a totally different view of reality than that which is seen when one travels the contemplative way. (201)

In "Wearing Our Mitres to Bed: Thomas Merton and the Need for Humor in 'This Mad Place'" (221-42), Paul M. Pearson has written the essay I wanted to write, but to which he brings such comprehensive and rich familiarity. This essay contains more than Louie's humor; it includes material that is flat-out comic. The examples include pre-monastic cartoons, eccentricities of the monastic life (including mocking himself), humor in poems, humor in letters (especially those between Merton and Lax), humor on tape, in books, in photos and calligraphy. Pearson says, "when an elderly monk departs the refectory, banging the door in protest at the recording being played," Merton writes,

> Pontiffs! Pontiffs! We are all pontiffs haranguing one another, brandishing our crosiers at one another, dogmatizing, threatening anathemas! Recently in the breviary we had a saint who, at the point of death, removed his pontifical vestments and *got out of bed*. He died on the floor, which is only right: but one hardly has time to be edified by it – one is still musing over the fact that he had pontifical vestments on *in bed*. . . . Let us examine our consciences . . . do we wear our mitres even to bed? (230)

As for comedy, here is Merton in 1964 to the novices: "How do you get six elephants into a Volkswagen? Three in the front seat, three in the back seat [laughter]. [Student: Is that a koan?] [laughter] No, that's just one of these useless jokes. There are a lot of elephant jokes going around now apparently. Where did I get it from? Brother Albert, he's got the elephant jokes over there, I'll have to get some more elephant jokes. Okay, this is useless, but there may be a reason for saying something like this once in a while" (232). Useless elephant jokes! Like useless rain? As Thomas Aquinas (quoted by Hugo Rahner in *Man at Play*) wrote: "unmitigated seriousness betokens a lack of virtue because it wholly despises play, which is as necessary for a good human life as rest is." Earlier in this wonderful essay, Pearson cites the estimable Father Matthew Kelty, also a monk of Gethsemani, saying Merton's humor leaned toward the "cutting," "sarcastic . . . British (Anglo-Saxons)"? Hardly! More likely, Kelty was betraying his South Boston lineage, and possibly teasing the author of this essay. Closer to Jewish humor; as Lenny Bruce once said, if you're from New York City, you're Jewish even if you're Catholic. Wasn't Merton, in important ways, of "the City"?

In "Beholding New Things and Reconciling All Things: A Bibliographic Review of 2019" (243-52), Joseph Quinn Raab surveys books, articles, essays and tapes by fifteen authors (and a sixteenth from 2018). Topics covered by these sources include haiku and the spirit of Merton, the short-listing by the Pulitzer Committee of Merton's book of poetry *The Tears of the Blind Lions* in 1950, his receiving the Harriet Monroe Award for two poems in that collection. Further themes are priestly sacrifice, racism and Catholic social teachings, Merton and Trump, Merton's correlation with civil rights scholar Derrick Bell, racial violence in Britain, Merton and colonization of Amerindians, Merton and prophetic ministry in India and more broadly interreligious dialogue, Merton and silence, sections of Harold Talbott's memoir dealing with his time in India with Merton, and being ushered into meeting the young Dalai Lama, the communal dimension of Advaitic spirituality, revisiting Polonnaruwa, and early and ongoing ecumenical work linking Douglas Steere, Glenn Hinson and Merton. Volume 33 also contains nine reviews of books, tapes and conferences. These are Merton's conference notes on medieval Cistercian history, his lectures on following him into the wilderness, recordings containing his reflections on Kafka, and proceedings of the 2019 Münsterschwarzach Merton conference. Books reviewed deal with Merton and Buddhism (which Raab avers really adds to this conversation), indigenous wisdom, music and theology, meditation in the classroom and, finally, Merton on overcoming technological and instrumental reason.

In his essay in *Contemplation in a World of Action* entitled "Is the World a Problem?" (as cited by Pearson), Merton wrote, "I love beer, and, by that very fact, the world" (232). With or without the beer, happy reading!

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