

Encounters with the Stranger

Review of
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I have always looked forward to the arrival of *The Merton Annual* in my mailbox. Usually, I sampled or snacked on the contents. I would read the review of a book I was interested in, an essay on an aspect of Merton's thought, or would give my attention to an essay that might assist my own research. *The Merton Annual* would be consumed over a period of weeks or months. Until now, I had never sat down and made a meal of it.

The Seventeenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, held remotely in June 2021, took its theme from the lines "Thou inward Stranger / Whom I have never seen," writes co-editor Deborah Pope Kehoe in her introduction, "The Many Faces of the Stranger" (7-12). She notes that many of the essays in volume 34 were presentations from that General Meeting, focusing attention on the ways Merton was an ally to those labelled "outsider" or "stranger." Her introduction is helpful in this regard. Had I approached the journal in my usual manner, I might have had difficulty connecting Robert Weldon Whalen's essay situating Merton as an artist within the context of the post-war, existentialist avant-garde movement with Merton's own short essay on the influence one of his teachers had in shaping his twelve-year-old self, or with Gordon Oyer's careful investigation into the development of Merton's growing concerns on racism and civil rights.

Yet they do indeed connect. Thirteen essays hold "stranger" up to the light and allow every possible facet to be explored. We see an integrated, often changing and very human Thomas Merton. Merton's activities as student, poet-artist, cloistered monk, social activist, theologian, student of eastern religions, correspondent and caring friend all intersect. The reader is provided with intellectual nourishment, but more importantly, with a living example of what it means to be open to the other, to see the divine in the other and to reach out in love in a manner that honors truth and difference, while closing the perceived gap between self and others.

Patrick O'Connell sets the tone by offering Merton's short essay, "On Remembering Monsieur Delmas" (13-24), pointing out in his introductory note that when asked to reflect on a teacher who deeply influenced him, Merton did not respond with the names of luminaries like Dan Walsh or

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Mark Van Doren (see 16); rather, he focused on Monsieur Delmas, a teacher at the Lycée Ingres in Montauban, France, where Merton was enrolled as a young student. Merton describes entering the school as “equivalent to entering Sing Sing” (18). Life at the school was regimented, austere, and students were expected to “conform to authoritarian decrees of all sorts” (19). Apart from class, professors had no contact with students. In short, Merton recalls a time in his boyhood when he was feeling as though he were imprisoned, an outsider and a stranger. His teacher, Monsieur Delmas, is remembered as a humble man, one who “dealt with boys as with people,” was patient, created an atmosphere where the gift of learning was possible, and “found human beings more important than regulations” (20-21). Delmas quietly reached across the chasm of school custom, and touched a lonely, young Thomas Merton, in a manner that affirmed his dignity and humanity. Delmas is an example of reaching out to the stranger, the other, and his influence on the mature Merton of the late nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties is evident.

Bonnie Thurston, in “The ‘Inward Stranger’: Challenge, Coordinates, Consequences” (25-37), takes us through *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *The Inner Experience* and other familiar essays, journal entries and poetry, underscoring the concrete nature of Merton’s spiritual quest. “By his own admission, as a young man he was a mess. He didn’t know who he was. That much of his early monastic writing was about sorting out the True from the False Self is because that’s what he himself was doing at the time” (35). It was only after Merton was able to recognize and befriend his inner stranger that he “could recognize his unity with others and see the face of Christ in them” (35). There would have been no Fourth and Walnut experience, and no writing on war or racism, Thurston suggests, had that inner work not been done. Thurston challenges us to deepen our contemplative experience, not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. She concludes, “the tap root of action to improve the lot of humanity and of our planet itself is sunk deep in the soil of True Selves who see themselves in the face of the other and the face of God in the other and the enemy. . . . Thomas Merton suggests that the world’s healing begins within each one of us” (36-37).

Andrew Prevot, in “Contemplation in Times of Crisis” (38-53), appeals to Merton to help us distinguish true from false contemplation. He asserts that for Merton the fruit of true contemplation is found in a vision that resists “a mere practice of navel-gazing” and instead embraces “a stand against violence and injustice” (43). He explores the crisis of racism Merton addressed in the 1960s, then draws us forward to reflect on the current Black Lives Matter movement. Prevot points us towards another aspect of “stranger” in Merton’s writing. It is not the “inward stranger” but the stranger as outward and “other.” Refusing to allow us to think of “stranger” in some vague manner, Prevot insists that for the many white readers of Merton, the “other” is black. He writes, “If Merton were writing today, he would urge white Christians to discern the loving presence of God in such movements. He would ask them to . . . recognize the presence of Christ in their Black brothers and sisters” (49).

Gordon Oyer’s “Thomas Merton’s Path towards Writing on Racial Concerns” (54-77) and Michael Higgins’ “Après Kamloops, le Déluge: Institutional Church, Indigenous Oppression and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition” (78-91) continue the exploration of the stranger in the context of racism. Oyer traces the gradual emergence of Merton’s concerns for Black and Indigenous people from his time at Oakham up to 1963, when Jim Forest encouraged him to give voice to his concerns in the magazine *Liberation*. Oyer lays out for us the concrete steps Merton took to inform himself

on the situation of Black and Indigenous peoples: the books he read, the novels he imaginatively engaged, the influence of the Berrigan brothers, and his efforts to form relationships with Blacks through letters. In doing so, he offers Merton as a model for engaging with strangers. Merton demonstrates an approach intentionally forming mind, heart and conscience, moving beyond opinion to encounter, solidarity and action. Oyer includes as an addendum Merton's essay from *Liberation*, "Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom" (72-77), which had not been published since it first appeared in 1963.

Higgins focuses on the Canadian government's and the church's complicity in adopting policies of cultural genocide towards First Nations peoples. Over against this colonial mindset that doomed "a people and a voice to extinction" and now requires "the urgent moral reckoning of a church, a government, a country" (81), Higgins offers the theo-poetics of Thomas Merton and John Moriarty as an alternative Catholic vision to the conquering and assimilation of the stranger. In Merton he finds a willingness "to recognize the divine child in the other . . . a radical summons to acknowledge the sacred otherness of the stranger" (86). While this vision developed in Merton within the walls of a monastery, Moriarty found himself drawn to leave the confines of the university and encounter first-hand the landscape of Canada and the stories and legends of First Nations people. Moriarty writes of the Cree, "Hoping that they would redesign my mind and my way of being in the world, I had allowed myself to be conquered, to be conquistatored, by some native myths" (89). This theo-poetics of encounter that honors the stranger, suggests Higgins, offers the only hope of real reconciliation with First Nations peoples.

Merton's theo-poetic vision is brought alongside the work of Jewish feminist scholar Melissa Raphael in Christopher Pramuk's "'The Grey Face of the Other': Sparks of the Divine in a Toppling World" (92-106). Drawing on Raphael's *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* and Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, Pramuk dares us to imagine the flickering presence of the feminine divine, manifested as Shekhinah or Sophia, in small human acts of compassion offered in resistance to violence and evil. "The fearful mystery of grace hinges precisely on the moment – the accumulated constellation of moments – in which we, and people we will never meet, say yes or no to love. Collectively, what such moments reveal is a picture of God's power and presence as manifest in the vulnerability and weakness of incarnate love" (104).

Gary Hall, in "Up Close and Particular: Remembering Herman Hanekamp and Merton's Other Insights into Loving Strangers" (107-19), acknowledges the importance of Merton's epiphany at Fourth and Walnut but points out that the people of whom Merton wrote "we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers," did, in fact, remain total strangers (112). Investigating Merton's response to the death of a neighbor and former monk, Herman Hanekamp, Hall demonstrates that it is in particularity, in relationship to actual persons, that we actually begin to experience the awakening of understanding and compassion.

James Robinson's "'The Age of Rosemarys': Thomas Merton's Engagement with Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Haughton" (120-28) studies the impact on Merton's encounters with two women theologians, Rosemary Haughton and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Here we see the monk reaching across the divides of gender and his monastic institution. By reading these women's theological works, and reaching out to them in letters, Merton is challenged and changed. Commenting on Haughton, Merton remarks, "Evidently there is an aspect of theology which is

not revealed to you until you have a baby” (122). At one point in their exchange of letters, Merton asks if Ruether might be his confessor. Robinson sees in these encounters a rejection of the notion of theology as a solitary quest, and the development of a relational model where theology is what happens between people.

John Marshall, in “Unpacking the ‘Eastern Thing’ of Thomas Merton” (129-51), and Huili S. Stout, in “Thomas Merton and the Difficulty of Interreligious Dialogue” (152-71), explore Merton’s reaching across the divide to those strangers in other religious traditions. Marshall’s essay functions as a corrective, drawing our attention to the depth of Merton’s interests in Eastern religions beyond Buddhism, focusing on his interests in Taoist literature and his collaborations with John Wu. Stout raises the question of Merton’s legacy as a pioneer in inter-religious dialogue. While acknowledging Merton’s “poetic and connatural empathy for the strangers” of other religions he would meet, and his ability to cut through “the illusion we are separate from one another by our religions” (170), Stout is clear that Merton’s work in this area has yet to enter the mainstream of Catholic imagination.

In “Merton’s Strange Archipelago: Poetic Responses to a Prosaic Journey” (172-94), Patrick O’Connell guides us through two of Merton’s poems, “The City after Noon” and “How to Enter a Big City.” He investigates Merton’s journal entries and other writings about his 1948 trip to Louisville, showing how Merton reworked and integrated material from an unpublished poem into these poems. In “The City after Noon” Merton can only see in the city the “‘destitution’ of modern urban life” (181); while “How to Enter a Big City” suggests that he has seen “signs and sources of renewed life . . . beneath the superficial appearances” of the city (192). O’Connell’s careful work in providing context and development for these poems allows him to suggest that Merton’s Fourth and Walnut embrace of strangers was not so much a sudden event, as an arrival point in the evolution of Merton’s attitude to the world.

“Noir, Hip, Beat, Cool: Thomas Merton and the Postwar, Trans-Atlantic, Existentialist Avant-Garde” (195-204) examines Merton as an artist. Robert Whalen investigates the meaning of these four adjectives in the context of the existential avant-garde artistic movements of the nineteen fifties and sixties. Whalen uses humor in his analysis, but may also make the reader’s head spin, when he offers that once Thomas Merton was “in the monastery he was never seen in a zoot suit . . . while all Beats were hip, not all hipsters were beat. You could wear a zoot suit and be hip, but not know much about Jack Kerouac, but if you were Jack Kerouac, you were both hip and beat with or without a zoot suit” (198-99). He effectively places Merton within the avant-garde movement, and in so doing assists us in realizing that Merton’s resistance to the superficiality and violence of twentieth-century culture through his poetry, art and photography made him, as much as his monastic vows, a marginal person or stranger.

The final essay, “Are We There Yet? Thomas Merton as Experience, Text and Event” (205-18) by Fred Herron, wonders if once all the Merton papers and letters are catalogued and published, “Will Merton studies finally have come to the end of the line?” (205). He looks at this question using categories of document, experience and event. In his conclusion he notes the manner in which scholars and others attending Merton conferences and retreats “will begin their discussions of Merton with a personal experience related to what they read first or what he meant to them” (217), suggesting the experience of Merton goes beyond investigating what Merton said and meant. Herron’s conclusion is “it’s too soon to tell” (218).

Perhaps, though, the answer to Herron's question can be hinted at in Volume 34's book review section. In "Extending the Frontier: A Bibliographic Review of 2020" (219-31), Deborah Pope Kehoe introduces this final section, surveying the significant books and essays by, about or referring to Thomas Merton that have been published in the past year, before directing us to the seven fine books that are formally reviewed (232-65). The range of subjects is as diverse as the approaches in the thirteen essays on "stranger": Merton on scripture; Merton the photographer; Catholic Non-violence; Merton's monastic spirituality; Merton and adolescent spirituality; Merton and Day as models of living the greatest commandment; and the remarkable memoir of Jim Forest, who left us this past January.

An encounter with Merton as spiritual writer, artist and mentor allows for many paths to be taken, for much to be explored. The end does not appear to be in sight. In fact, by directing our attention to those essays and books, Kehoe is actually whetting our appetites for the next feast.