

Introduction

Fragmentation and the Quest for the Spiritual in the Late Twentieth Century

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In Czeslaw Milosz's journal *A Year of the Hunter*, his chronicle of 1987 and 1988, he ponders his desire to identify a novel which would provide insight into the contemporary cultural scene just as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* had earlier served as metaphor for the illness of the earliest years of the century. Such a book would, perhaps, provide insight into the spiritual condition of today's civilization. Mann's bleak sanitarium novel, we remember, helped Walker Percy form his own initial fictional inquiry about spiritual disorder and contemporary times, but Thomas Merton, already in his *The Secular Journal*, professed to finding Mann's novel too formulaic. Maybe that is why Milosz imagines he himself might compose a novel which would reflect the complexity of the strivings and contradictions of the present age, but within a completely different setting.

Surprisingly, his imagined locus for such fiction which could delineate essential features of the spiritual landscape might be, he speculates, either in Rome or at the Abbey of Gethsemani where Merton lived. Milosz's entry then also discusses many of the persons Merton himself was reading in the 1960s (Maritain, Arendt, Heidegger), and further it speculates that the Kentucky abbey where so many persons had come to visit Merton would work especially well as setting.

This seems at first an extreme suggestion, but in fact it triggers still other stimulating and imaginative possibilities. In many ways Merton was someone who would fit well into such a novel. His

gregariousness and the vast body of his energetic writings and letters continues to provide a meeting place for thousands of readers today. In a fictional setting Merton's sometimes paradoxical insights into contemporary culture's longing could provide an excellent oblique commentary. It is also quite possible to imagine his particular monastery as a meeting place and setting because writers—poets, intellectuals, artists, philosophers—as different as Jacques Maritain, Walker Percy, Denise Levertov, Douglass T. Steer, and Joan Baez—did indeed visit there along with many others. Percy, in a 1980 interview about his admiration for Merton, lamented that he had not chosen to ask Merton more specific questions when they had met at Gethsemani in 1967, yet the point is that as seekers of spiritual truth they were on the same quest.

Milosz's insight about a projected novel which would reflect the present age is an excellent one because a figure like Merton could serve as a catalyst. Merton, we remember, had read *The Moviegoer* in 1965 and sent Percy a fan letter. He found the novel a key to our contemporary moment's distress. Just like the hero, Binx Bolling, of that novel, Merton realized that all persons in this culture are displaced, yet in continuing to question, they find glimmers of the sacred. Questioning was at the heart of all Thomas Merton's continuing work as he examined the wider culture, and this is part of his legacy. Thus, this marginal monk's work remains important in relation to the core of our own culture's fundamental questions about how to live and love in an age which seems so radically different from earlier ages.

If we are to make sense of how to reintegrate the spiritual into our fragmented lives, contemplative need (perceived by commentators like Milosz, Percy, and Merton) and aspects of a solitary mode of life may indeed be parts of the answer. Yes, such reappraisal, and certainly within a novel, could include a character resembling Thomas Merton, but it would because such a character would be thinking and writing about aspects of the world beyond the monastic. Appropriately, many of the papers in this volume of *The Merton Annual* were planned to deal with aspects of lay and everyday spirituality. Therefore, each of the three articles which constitute the opening part of this book, articles by Patrick O'Connell, Wendy M. Wright, and Beatrice Bruteau, examine crucial issues which relate to day by day living. These papers stand at the core of today's inquiry concerning what might be described as the dilemma of contemporary spirituality, and Merton is their impetus.

As O'Connell systematically explains, the issue of the relationship of monastic spirituality to life outside the monastery became increasingly important for Merton as his understanding of monasticism developed, and this same type of relationship, Merton knew, was of fundamental importance for each person as life unfolds in the ordinary contexts of experience. Each of these three opening essays was planned to demonstrate, as a unit, that at the heart of our developing understanding of spirituality is the fact of the individual's active involvement moment by moment. It may take decades of pondering, but it is eventually clear that spirituality will not be divorced from, but is always integrated with, all aspects of life.

O'Connell demonstrates that for Merton's mature spirituality it became much less a matter of just following institutional patterns. Similar points are quietly made by Professor Wright in her essay which demonstrates that much of what Merton articulated also can be lived out in ordinary lay life "becoming aware of the natural contemplative moments and rhythms." The third essay, by Beatrice Bruteau, uses Merton as a springboard to assure us that in all creation, there is unity, and thus, ultimately "eucharistic cosmos."

Read together these essays provide overlapping examinations which build upon the legacy of Thomas Merton. Clearly, Father Louis came to see that many unnecessary distinctions between lay and monastic existence, or between Christian and non-Christian belief, clouded our ability to live contemplatively. O'Connell, Wright, and Bruteau each, therefore, help us to see that the presence of God is a matter of "energy sharing." Finally, full sharing means sharing on all levels: the monk, the mother, and mediator, cannot be separate. Many of the remaining essays included in this book were designed to examine related issues.

The three essays which follow all deal with Merton as poet. In completely different ways they seem almost to build upon the general points made about spirituality in the opening three articles. This is because of the honesty in Merton's poetry. His poetic development was one of continual change and an ever greater openness to mystery. Alan Altany's article shows how this poet, the Merton of the 1960s, transcended some of his earlier assumptions. Several of the remaining essays in this volume deal more specifically with the intersection of the transcendent with the ordinary, of the everyday with the theological, of the infusion of the ordinary life with a radiance beyond the ordinary. Poetry was, for Merton, the very best manifestation of this developing interplay.

The three essays by Altany, Archer, and Cooper examine how Merton realized this unfolding of mystery and insight, and how this was illuminated by the gift of poetic skill which allows the ordinary to shine. Altany's essay documents Merton's own poetic transformation. Archer's article demonstrates parallels between Merton and his contemporary Denise Levertov as they lived through the same era. Her analysis of parallels between Merton's poetry and Denise Levertov's is appropriately followed by the examination by David Cooper about the decades-long relationship between Merton and his poetry publisher, James Laughlin (who has also served as Levertov's publisher for decades as well).

The Cooper article illustrates how Merton was stimulated by, and engaged with, his editor, Laughlin, throughout a quarter of a century. Their correspondence was voluminous. One regrets that it was necessary for Cooper to select from this rather large correspondence of Merton with his publisher-friend for the *Selected Letters* which Cooper edited and describes here. What one can clearly see is that this was a two-way relationship and that Merton, would not, could not, be sealed off from contemporary life and interests, and that his writing profited from stimulation beyond the monastery.

In the three additional examinations which follow of Merton as a man of letters fruitfully engaged with the world, other scholars here also study the many ways Father Louis apparently profited from being involved with questions about writing about the world. Using the Working Notebooks as her springboard, Claire Badaracco makes the very substantial point that throughout his reading notebooks Merton was engaged in a kind of creative tension and that a similar kind of engagement serves as a model for contemporary feminine spiritual writers who question traditional paradigms. Bradford Stull's article provides still more specific evidence about how particularities of Merton's metaphorical language in his "theo-political essays" function to draw the reader in. Ultimately Merton could not not be involved. As a non-systematic, yet often metaphorical writer, he also draws his reader into a questioning stance like his own. In the related essay by David Belcastro we see how Merton came to be more and more engaged with the writings of Albert Camus. Not unlike Milosz (who Belcastro reminds us urged Merton to read Camus) Camus was fascinated with the complexity of modern culture with and without Christian belief. Whether one is a believer or not, both Camus and Merton would agree one cannot avoid raising spiritual questions.

My final grouping of three essays demonstrates still other aspects of Merton's importance for today's reader and his continuing quest to make sense of what it means to live well. If the opening essays by O'Connell, Wright, and Bruteau demonstrate Merton's importance in relation to a developing spirituality beyond the cloister, and the second group by Altany, Archer, and Cooper demonstrate his growing abilities as poet, and the third grouping by Badaracco, Stull, and Belcastro shows how he was ever more involved with the world through his reading and writing, these final three studies emphasize that his life and writings continue to provide fuel for important discussions within today's world.

In Mark O'Keefe's essay about Merton's "true self" and the "fundamental option" we see that Merton's examinations of the true self provide a key for contemporary theology to discuss the holistic structure of Christian life. We are also reminded in the essays by Johan Seynnaeve and John Wu, Jr. that the true spiritual seeker must keep looking, searching, questioning. The parallels between Merton and Dom Thomas Verner Moore, as they both drew nearer the isolation of a Carthusian life, are examined by Seynnaeve who reminds us that Merton's desire to become a Carthusian was not encouraged by Moore, and that apparently Dom Moore was not so much thwarting Merton as expressing that he sensed Merton was not ready for such a life. Clearly in 1947 Merton was still dealing with fundamental questions about his vocation which could not then be easily resolved and certainly not by leaving the Abbey of Gethsemani.

The essay by John Wu, Jr. brings us back to many of the same fundamental connections examined by O'Connell, Wright, and Bruteau, and reminds us how fortunate it was for Merton, and subsequent generations of readers that he kept struggling with fundamental questions about his necessary relationships to society.

In addition to the articles discussed in this introduction, this volume of *The Merton Annual* includes several other valuable items. As has been the custom for these ten years of the existence of the *Annual*, we are again able to provide an edited version of a previously unavailable Merton manuscript. It has been ably edited by Patrick Hart, and in "The School of the Spirit" we have valuable evidence of the young, energetic Merton literally preparing his way (and ours) for the later mature contemplative who related much more openly to the world. In the interview, different than the preceding interviews in earlier volumes which concentrated on persons who knew Merton personally,

we have evidence of Merton's influence and insight into the present moment. Conducted and edited by Jonathan Montaldo, with the Merton scholar Anthony Padavano, this interview provides still more connections between Merton's legacy and the present age.

Certainly, in a very real sense all the reading and study of, and writing about, Merton, thirty years after his death exists as a kind of enactment of what Ceslaw Milosz imagined as an ideal meeting place for the interaction of persons who are seeking ways to integrate the spiritual into their post-modern lives.

The bibliographical survey-analysis of the significant books and articles by and about Merton which appeared during 1996, another reflection of Merton's speaking to a wide variety of persons, has been prepared by fellow editor George Kilcourse. The book reviews, which include reviews of three more complete Merton Journals (volumes 2, 3, and 4) have been coordinated by Michael Downey, who, with this volume of *The Merton Annual*, is completing five years of association with the Annual. His contribution, and that of all the editors in the first series (Volumes 1 through 5) and the second series (Volumes 6-10) have assisted to make this decade of Merton scholarship fruitful. We hope that the work of the Annual during the past ten years has provided assistance toward the world's understanding of Merton's quest for the spiritual in the late twentieth century.

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EDITORIAL NOTE:

In *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 9 (1996) within the article by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., "Editing the Journals of Thomas Merton," the impression was mistakenly made that the "Macaronic Lyric" (p. 234) is part of the entry which begins on page 330 of *Run to the Mountain*. In fact, the poem is a separate work. For more information, see *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1996), pp. 7-8.