

## **Introduction: Merton's Openness to Change and his Foreshadowing of a Feminist Spirituality**

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In *The Merton Annual* two years ago a group of essays were included which examined the complexity of Thomas Merton's changing relationship to the most basic ingredients of his vowed community life—monasticism. Several of those essays examined aspects of his developing stance in relation to his Cistercian life with a very critical, even a skeptical eye. Both Michael Casey and James Wiseman, fellow monks and (no doubt) admirers of Merton's many accomplishments, examined aspects of his journals and assessed some of the surprises candidly revealed there by this monk/writer who provided copious evidence of how his growth as a person might well, and justifiably, did cause others to be disappointed, if not scandalized.<sup>1</sup> Yet as is so often the case with analysis of Merton's life and works, closer examination always seems to reveal a complexity which allows a still greater and more subtle analysis.

Casey's argument was that Merton's journals reveal that he was not as good a 'community man' as some might have hoped. That conclusion is certainly not to be questioned. Yet other articles in that Volume 12 gathering of *The Merton Annual* suggest that Merton's life cannot be examined so much as a failing but rather as his striving to integrate.<sup>2</sup>

1. Michael Casey, OCSO, 'Merton's Teaching on the "Common Will" and What the Journals Tell Us', *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), pp. 62-84, and James A. Wiseman, OSB, 'Learning to Love and Learning the Price: Thomas Merton and the Challenge of Celibacy', pp. 85-102.

2. See 'Thomas Merton: A Monk Who "Succeeded": An Interview by Correspondence with Dom M. Laurence Bourget, OCSO', *The Merton Annual* 12 (1999), pp. 38-61, and John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, 'Monasticism and Thomas Merton,

His questions about community life as revealed in his journals reflect this process.

It was the dissonance of those earlier essays, which I read in various stages of preparation, which convinced me that it might be profitable to ask other scholars to tackle related issues which would help us to understand Merton's sometimes surprising deviance from predictable paths. Consultation with various scholars, and most especially Christine M. Bochen, who currently served as President of the International Thomas Merton Society, convinced me that it would be profitable to pursue related questions about how Merton, while not predictable, was ever growing in his understanding of himself. His apparent need to integrate basic aspects of his personhood prompted the query: could a group of new essays about Merton and the feminine help us to further understand why, most especially at the end of his life—the years of *Dancing in the Water of Life* and *Learning to Love* as chronicled in his journals—he was sometimes surprising.<sup>3</sup> 'Surprise', though, exists because it is often difficult to see Merton's 'contradictions' as flowing from his utter honesty. For him, somewhat predictable Emersonian and Thoreauvian strains met, mingled, even we might say merged with other mystical and natural strain(s). Merton clearly felt compelled to keep asking questions, changing his mind and thus developing new insights. This seems especially true as reflected toward the end of his life and in his journals and poetry.

One can also go to a collection of essays such as *Mystics and Zen Masters*<sup>4</sup> to be reminded of Merton's willingness—over and over—to reside in a changing geography of 'nowhere' familiar. In many areas from public issues (war, race, technology) to the private (his own dreams, fears, hopes) Merton allowed himself to go beyond the conventional and predictable. This seems especially so when it comes to questions which he raised toward the end of his life and especially so when he confronts aspects of the feminine.

What unites many of the pieces gathered here about Merton and the feminine is how they reveal that he kept developing ways to make connections and to extend his appreciation and knowledge to higher

Monk, Priest and Author: His contributions to a Wider Understanding of Spirituality', pp. 22-37.

3. The journals are replete with Merton's contradictions: See especially volumes five and six: *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963-66; Harper San Francisco, 1997); *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966-67; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

4. *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965).

levels. As Christine Bochen has noted in conversation, his continuing relationship with Naomi Burton Stone was slowly expanded so that a vocabulary which began as exchange with someone who was his literary agent expanded and became an expression of true friendship. We see this also in the unpublished commentary by Thomas Merton which we include in this gathering.

This edited tape, which was written as a response to a request by the Sisters of Loretto that Merton assist them in assessing their new constitution is a beautiful example of his willingness to get involved with women religious just as the Church was hopefully looking toward the future following Vatican II.

We are grateful that Sr Rose Liddell, SL, suggested that we use this tape transcription which was annotated by Merton himself. Sr Jane Marie Richardson has placed this interesting document within its historical timeframe. Obviously, Merton was becoming more and more aware of the fact that he could learn from others.

If we stand back from the patterns revealed in the essays included here by Bonnie Thurston and Monica Weis what we see revealed is a monk/writer who gradually became more aware of his need to move beyond his earlier categories about women, and about nature, and to make a commitment to realms other than the predictably masculine. Thus, as we stand back from both the articles by Thurston and Weis, we see evidence of Merton's eagerness to develop beyond what some might call an earlier narrowness.

The essays by Weis and Dorothy LeBeau also reveal a monk's growing awareness of a desire to amplify his understanding of his vocation along with a growing respect for both the natural world and for others' opinions, which also allowed him to discover and acknowledge aspects of a feminine quality in himself.

Andrea Cook's analysis of *Eighteen Poems* demonstrates that there is an extremely positive aspect to the somewhat surprising relationship which Merton developed with the student nurse, 'M'. Merton simply would not keep from accepting this love and documenting this important aspect of his personal growth. He must have suspected what he was learning about himself was to be of value for others.

Merton's gift, therefore, as we learn from the various articles which consider aspects of the feminine included here, always seemed to be, as Fritjof Capra argues in *The Turning Point*, one half of a sign wave ahead of his immediate cultural surroundings. His awareness of significant developing changes in the Church, in monasticism, in East-West dialogue, in the culture's general need for contemplation, have all been well documented. In all these cases Merton serves like a

weather-vane. He also predicts aspects of the future. It is therefore no surprise that he could also 35 or 40 years ago anticipate changes in our own awareness about an integrated consciousness about the feminine and what the role of women in church and society was, and was to become.

A key to his gift of being open to change as manifested in so many ways was his continuing ability to remain open to others and to be open to each particular moment. We especially see this in the articles here which document his changing relationships with the particular women he came to love: Rosemary Ruether, his beloved nurse, and we suspect many others such as members of the Loretto community for which he made the tape included here.

We also see Merton's ability to adapt, develop and change in the other pieces assembled here. Through his art—journals and line drawings and his love of poetry—he could often transmute his observances into new artistic, or critical work.

This issue of *The Merton Annual* provides two new examinations of Merton's poetry. The McCaslin article demonstrates how Merton's interest in William Blake was an enduring one. The essay by Malgorzata Poks provides a fresh examination of Merton's continuing 'endless' experimentation as poet and explorer of words. Both articles allow us to see that Merton's poetry was his continuing unfolding set of inscriptions, never to be finished, as indeed was his work on so many other fronts. This is so because he remained open to ideas, experimentation, influences from everything from reading to the unconscious.

The gallery of line drawings assembled here and commented upon by Jonathan Montaldo is a further example of Merton's openness. We can see connections which can be made between these drawings and Merton's fascination with learning about the feminine. He kept wondering, sketching, dreaming, musing. In a very valuable sense these line drawings take us back to the article by Andrea Cook, an analytical survey of the *Eighteen Poems*, which makes it clear how these love poems function on several different levels. As Merton matured, he was able to confront issues in his life which had to do with his needed integration of the feminine part of his psyche.

Good work clearly is now being done on the issue of how Merton's writings reveal his maturation. Dreams as recorded in his journals reveal how he approached such complicated, interrelated questions. Using some of these same drawings and building on an awareness of Jungian psychology, Frances Adams, of Bellarmine University, produced a 'Senior Thesis' in 2001 with the title 'A Journey Toward the Feminine: An Introduction to the Feminine Archetype in the Dreams

and Selected Works of Thomas Merton'. Such synthesis should lead to other good studies in the future, as we hope all the essays included here will also encourage further scholarship.

As this issue of *The Merton Annual* was in process, several people were of great assistance. My assistant Glenn Crider helped immensely with many details. My fellow editor, George Kilcourse, assumed extra responsibilities beyond doing the annual bibliographic survey. Christine Bochen, while busy with responsibilities as President of the International Thomas Merton Society, provided much good advice and counsel, plus she found time to finish editing a successful interview with Sr Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, which demonstrates Merton's continuing importance on many fronts.

As is our custom we include book reviews both by and about Merton and on related subjects. I want to express my thanks to all our contributors and also express a special word of thanks to our book reviewers whose work is done with as much care and attention as longer pieces prepared for this publication.