

Thomas Merton's *Conversatio Morum* 2014 Bibliographic Review Essay

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Conversion to monastic way of life: The third vow that Benedictines make, *conversatio morum* or conversion through a monastic way of life, encompasses many things including: living simply, living a celibate chaste life, and simply living the schedule of daily prayers, meals with the community, sacred reading, and constantly dealing with the ups and downs of living in community. It is the daily life that slowly, one day at a time hopefully changes the young novice some sixty to eighty years later into a holy monk. The difference from one day to the next is not detectable and over time, it can be parallel to the slow dripping of water that eventually wears a hole through solid stone. However, the change does occur and the daily renewal of this promise to devote one's life to the working of this transformation is what this vow is about.

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It is the twenty-fifth anniversary of my taking the novice habit. . . . I find that I certainly do not believe in the monastic life as I did when I entered here – and when I was more sure I knew what it was. Yet I am much more convinced I am doing more or less what I ought to do, though I don't know why and cannot fully justify it.

Thomas Merton²
22 February 1967

Introduction

With regard to the young Thomas Merton, Dom Benedetto Calati asked, "If a monk, what kind of a monk is he?"³ As we move between two sig-

1. See: <http://www.abbeyvocations.com/virtual-vocation-office/faq/monastic-vows-qanda>.

2. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 201; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.

3. See the discussion of Merton's relationship with Dom Calati in Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015) 227-32; subsequent references will be cited as "Grayston"

nificant events, the one-hundredth-year celebration of Merton's birth in 2015 and the fiftieth-year remembrance of his death in 2018, the question rephrases to read, "If a monk, what kind of a monk did he become?" This question lingers in the back of our minds as we plan the 2017 conference of the International Thomas Merton Society. St. Bonaventure University has been selected as the appropriate site for this event as it represents a turning point in Merton's journey. As such, this conference offers participants a pilgrimage into a sacred place that shaped the life of a spiritual master whose work continues to engage our lives in the twenty-first century. This question is also present as we plan the next volume of *The Merton Annual*. In addition to articles that focus on formative moments and places in Merton's life, books will be reviewed that have something to say about his final formation as a monk. For example two significant publications in 2015 approach our question from different vantage points yet converge and complement one another. Donald Grayston's *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* narrates the story of Merton's journey via a long and meandering route complicated by the age-old problem of *acedia*. Roger Lipsey's *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox*⁴ explores the relationship that played such a significant role in Merton's struggle with *acedia* that eventually led to his maturing as a monk and writer.

The following books, journals, essays and film address from different perspectives Merton's growth as a monk. After considering publications that explore various aspects of his personal life and relations, we will turn to those that seek to clarify the development of his thought and his formation as a monk for persons engaged in social issues. As the reader will readily notice, several of the publications could easily fit in more than one section of this essay. Even so, the sections provide a way of thinking through Merton's complex vocation that not only took a lifetime to realize but generations of scholars to discern. As Merton himself recognized, he was not a monk according to any categories defined by others or of which he was aware. This, however, did not concern him. What did concern him was being true to his own graces and his own task in life – graces and task lived as questions continuously discerned in the solitude and silence of his heart.⁵ From such a remote place as his interior life emerged a

parenthetically in the text.

4. Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down: The Long Encounter of Thomas Merton and His Abbot, James Fox* (Boston: Shambhala, 2015).

5. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 68-

*messenger from the horizon*⁶ announcing the grace, truth and beauty so desperately needed in the world. The publications herein considered from 2014 contribute to our understanding and appreciation of a vocation that was faithfully lived via the trajectories of a paradox hidden, as Merton recognized, in the sign of Jonas.⁷

Exploring Merton's Personal Growth

As with Grayston and Lipsey's books, John Moses' *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*⁸ focuses on a troublesome aspect of Merton's life that nonetheless played a significant role in his final formation. While the numerous contradictions characteristic of Merton's life and work are most obvious and for some time recognized, Moses traces the play of these opposites in the emergence of a prophetic voice in and for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As he points out, Merton does not try to escape his contradictions but rather chose to enter into them in search of a resolution. This resulted in a vocation born out of a fundamental tension between monastic life and the world. While remaining true to his monastic tradition, Merton was nonetheless open to religious and cultural diversity, engaged in contemporary social issues and committed to working with persons beyond the walls of Gethsemani. Merton's move to the center of his own contradictions was also a move into those of the postmodern world. Recall for a moment the opening lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men

69 [1/31/1964]; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text.

6. Thomas Merton, "A Messenger from the Horizon," in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 349-51; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text. Merton includes this poem in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz that may reflect his understanding of their vocation as poets; see Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997) 76-78; subsequent references will be cited as "STB" parenthetically in the text.

7. Most of the publications noted in this essay are also reviewed later in this volume. While they provide an overview, this essay will focus more narrowly on the contribution of each work with regard to the question noted above.

8. John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.⁹

Here is Merton's account of his first steps into the world, a world plagued with "self-contradictory hungers." It is not difficult to understand how *acedia* would eventually become an issue for him to address. The desire for silence and solitude far from maddening crowds would be most tempting – as would his need to address the concerns of those crowds that he would "see" for the first time at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. Nor is it difficult to appreciate how confusing this must have been for Dom James as he tried to discern the will of God for a perpetually discontent monk whose restlessness was unrecognized as essential to his vocation. Merton pressed boundaries, raised uncomfortable questions and publically articulated his discontent. Those boundaries, questions and discontents, however, were not his alone. They belonged to the world in which he lived and was called to serve as a priest and monk. The contradictions were combusting within him and would not allow him to rest until the final task of his vocation was accomplished. And what was that task? Moses rightly notes that it was the *restoration of God's image in the world*. For that to happen, it had to be done by and *within* one who was painfully aware of the contradictions between God's image and that of the world – contradictions of which Merton was fully aware not from observation alone but by participation in deep-seated conflicts of his age.

Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition,¹⁰ a journal published by Saint Bonaventure University, offers three interesting articles in a tribute to Merton during the centenary that shed light on the question of Merton's formation. In the first of the articles we are offered insight into Merton's *conversatio morum* that began long before he arrived at the Abbey of Gethsemani. F. Douglas Scutchfield's "Thomas Izod Bennett, MD and Thomas Merton: A History and Examination of Their Interaction"¹¹ focuses on Merton's relationship with his godfather, Dr. Bennett, who managed his affairs following the death of Owen Merton. Young Tom's struggle with stability, relationships and poor choices is noted. Of course, this could be dismissed as characteristic of adolescence. In Merton's case, however, these issues become significant when he decides to become a monk with vows of stability and obedience. With this in mind, a question emerges. What was moving him deeper into these contradic-

9. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3.

10. *Cithara: Essays in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* 54.2 (May 2015).

11. F. Douglas Scutchfield, "Thomas Izod Bennett, MD and Thomas Merton: A History and Examination of Their Interaction," *Cithara* 54.2 (May 2015) 5-17.

tions? He could have just as well followed the other Beats from Columbia University to San Francisco where freedom of the open road rather than confinement of cloistered walls would be the world in which he would be free to write without censorship. An answer to this question requires an inquiry into the very heart of Merton.

The second article reminds us that those cloistered walls represented monastic vows. Paul M. Pearson's "The Whale and the Ivy – Journey and Stability in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton"¹² begins with an interesting observation regarding Merton's ranking of vows according to difficulty and two that he left unmentioned.

"Poverty," Thomas Merton once said, "is a cinch. Chastity is harder but manageable. Obedience is a bugger!" (*Letters from Tom* 8). In that statement which Merton made to "Ping" Ferry it is interesting to note that he makes no reference to two other vows made by Benedictine and Cistercian monks, the vows of stability and of *conversatio morum*, conversion of manners – two vows which are unique to the *Rule of St. Benedict*. (18)

The article provides an account of the vow of stability, its history of interpretation and Merton's understanding of stability over his lifetime. As the title of the article suggests, there is a tension in Merton's life between journey and stability that is expressed in the metaphors of whale/movement and ivy/grounded found in *The Sign of Jonas*. This tension becomes a creative force in Merton's formation. Pearson summarizes:

By the end of his life Merton's geography spread out from his hermitage in the Gethsemani woods and covered the whole world. It was a sacred geography that transfigured time and place, that held *conversatio morum* and stability, pilgrimage and rootedness, the whale and the ivy together in a creative tension and pointed to the unity of humankind "in this most inhuman of ages." In the new geography that he had discovered on the margins of society, along with other artists and poets, prophets and Zen Masters, Merton became a cultural critic in his attempt at guarding human image which, as he pointed out, "is the image of God" (*Raids*). (30)

Within those walls and vows, there was, however, a paradise awaiting Merton. The third article by Monica Weis, "Awakening in the Garden: Thomas Merton's Discovery of Paradise"¹³ situates Merton's growth within the

12. Paul M. Pearson, "The Whale and the Ivy – Journey and Stability in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton." *Cithara* 54.2 (May, 2015) 18-32.

13. Monica Weis, "Awakening in the Garden: Thomas Merton's Discovery of

context of biblical and monastic images of gardens to provide another way of appreciating his final formation. Working with the images of the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemani, Weis creates a narrative of the sorrows and graces that germinated in the heart of Merton. These seeds of contemplation were cultivated within the Abbey of Gethsemani via study, prayer and work. The *horarium* was the daily tilling of the soil and the liturgical calendar provided the necessary rhythm of seasons for new growth. Weis' inquiry into Merton's formation via nature reveals another significant insight:

What is most striking to me in Merton's journals is the way in which gardens – both the cultivated gardens of the monastery and the wild, fecund, and often pristine vegetation of the surrounding wilderness – were a significant influence on his spiritual development, helping to make Thomas Merton the best-known spiritual writer of the twentieth century. (34)

With opportunities to roam the knobs that cradle the Abbey of Gethsemani and eventually retreat to an old garden shed and later a cinderblock hermitage, the contrast of cultivated gardens and the uncultivated woods became the interior landscape of the mature Merton. Here he was able to discover the intimacy with God that he long sought, an intimacy that became for him the “hidden ground of Love”¹⁴ from which flowered his writings on social and environmental justice.

The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer: Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam edited by F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook Jr.,¹⁵ *Meatyard/Merton – Merton/Meatyard: Photographing Thomas Merton*¹⁶ and Suzanne Zuercher's *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman Known as M*¹⁷ provide insights into relationships that contributed significantly to

Paradise,” *Cithara* 54.2 (May 2015) 33-49.

14. See Merton's April 13, 1967 letter to Amiya Chakravarty and his Smith College students in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 115.

15. Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer, *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer: Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*, ed. F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook Jr., Foreword by Paul M. Pearson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).

16. *Meatyard/Merton – Merton/Meatyard: Photographing Thomas Merton* with Introductions by Stephen Reily and Roger Lipsey and Essay by Christopher Meatyard (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014).

17. Suzanne Zuercher, *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman Known as M* (Chicago: In Extensio Press, 2014).

the unfolding and sometimes unpredictable trajectories of Merton's life. The convergence of men and women in Merton's life addressed a deep longing of the heart for conversation with persons beyond the walls of the abbey. Each person in his or her own way enriched his interior life.

The correspondence between Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer sets before us an exchange of letters that tell the story of a friendship between three persons. Victor and Carolyn lived in Lexington, Kentucky, a short drive from the monastery. Their home offered Merton hospitality he clearly valued and for which he was most appreciative. Victor was an artist recognized for his work as a painter, sculptor, printer and architect. Carolyn was founder of the King Library Press at the University of Kentucky. Their shared interests in spirituality, literature and art made for a creative exchange of ideas and projects. The story narrated and illustrated in this volume of Victor's triptych painting of *Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ* and Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia* signifies the heart of the relationship that they shared. At the center of their collaboration was a friendship and one that draws to our attention Merton's capacity for friendship on a deep and meaningful level.

The relationship with Ralph Eugene Meatyard also provided Merton an opportunity to explore and develop the artistic dimension of his vocation but in a different way and with a different focus. Meatyard, like the Hammers, was from Lexington. While he was by profession an optician, his avocation was photography. Stephen Reily in his Foreword describes Meatyard's work in ways that bring to mind the photographs that we have come to appreciate in the Merton archive.

Meatyard's work is famously difficult to describe because it took so many forms. He is probably best known for somewhat gothic, elegiac photos he took of his children in and around dilapidated houses and farm buildings near Lexington. He classified his own work in several distinct categories with names like No-Focus, Zen Twigs, Romances, Motion-Sound, Light on Water. Different as this work could be, at least one theme connected it all. . . . you could find something interesting no matter where you look.

The beginning of their friendship is worth noting as it reveals the nature of the work that they would eventually share. On January 18, 1967, Merton records in his journal that Meatyard came to visit along with Jonathan Williams and Guy Davenport (*LL* 186). Of the three, Meatyard left the greatest impression. Merton found in Meatyard's photography something haunting, suggestive and mythical. Less than two months later, Merton received a letter from Meatyard, dated August 12, asking if he would be

“willing to try something in an experimental vein” that would integrate prose or poetry with images. Most important about the request was the opportunity “to see how closely I [Meatyrd], or any artist can connect with the utterances of another.” Merton’s response two days later was affirmative. Together they explored, discovered and expressed. Their photographs and calligraphy reflect the playfulness of artists-monks with a capacity to see in the ordinary fractured reflections of sacred reality.

While we are aware that Thomas Merton’s relationship with M. played a significant role in his personal development, we have not as yet come to fully understand and appreciate its importance not only for him but for ourselves. Merton’s narration of his encounter with and reflections on Eros offers us an opportunity to think through one of the most significant problems of our times, i.e. the disconnect between spirituality and sexuality. Suzanne Zuercher offers us a balanced and sensitive inquiry into this intimate relation via her personal reflections on eighteen quotations from Merton’s journal entries regarding his love for M. Consequently, it merges Merton’s experience with our own and in such a way as to shed some light on this love that dare not be spoken. For the purposes of this essay, however, I found the seventeenth reflection (101-102) of particular interest and so turn our attention there.

Far from being just a love story about a middle-age man and a twenty-something woman, Merton’s journal tells of the maturing of a monastic vocation. Woven throughout the daily entries, and prominent in *Midsummer Diary for M*, we read of the dissatisfaction and disillusionment Merton was experiencing at Gethsemani. That is, perhaps, the main reason he was ready to meet a real woman, to find and express mutual love for another human being, to know the joy and anguish and imperfection of his complete incarnation as a spirit enfleshed. Moreover, he was also a man at that point in his life where the limitation of human institutions, no matter the good intentions of their members, could [not] possibly satisfy him.

The reflection takes an interesting turn and digs into a significant aspect of Merton’s formation and vocation.

Sam Keen uses the word “outlaw” to describe someone who has reached the point Keen calls “the phase beyond adulthood.” The outlaw moves outside and beyond any institutions in which he or she functions, at least somewhat comfortably, to enter into a new period of development. This metaphor reminds me of Merton’s certainty that it was right to open himself to this relationship with Margie, despite

its apparent contradiction with his vowed life. Margie led him to risk setting aside what Keen calls “the mores of the tribe.”

Zuercher puts her finger on an essential aspect of Merton’s vocation and eventual formation as a monk. He truly was a monk in the sense that he was *monos* – one, alone, solitary before God. He was one who stood on his own two feet. And standing alone he also stood outside all social constructs, not so much against them but for them seeking a wholeness that was lacking in not only the modern world but his own monastic tradition and within himself.

Discerning Patterns in the Development of Merton’s Monastic Theology

It is worth noting at the outset of this section Merton’s comment in *Ascent to Truth* regarding the importance of the intellectual life for the monk:

Saint John of the Cross did not sever his contact with the intellectual world of his time when he ended his course of theology at Salamanca. Soon after the beginning of the Carmelite reform, the Discalced Carmelites opened a college for their young clerics at the University of Alcalá. It is very significant that the third monastery founded in an order dedicated to penance and contemplative prayer and to preaching the interior life should have been a college.¹⁸

The following four books are by persons who value both the contemplative life and intellectual inquiry. Consequently, they are each able to shed light on the convergence of faith and reason in Merton’s life and work that enabled him to talk about God in such a way that the modern world could relate and understand. As each book illustrates, there is no way to separate life from thought when it comes to Merton for he thought through life experiences in a way similar to Gandhi’s approach to the religious life whereby truth was discovered in one’s engagement with life in light of the illumination provided by sacred traditions.¹⁹

Daniel P. Horan’s *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton*²⁰ is about the heart and mind of Merton. Horan carefully discerns the development of both via inquiries into his life and thought with a focus on the Franciscan influence that continued long after his years at St. Bonaventure.

18. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951) 144; subsequent references will be cited as “AT” parenthetically in the text.

19. See Mohandas Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

20. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2014).

There is biography here that adds to previous works on Merton's life, and there is much that contributes to our understanding of Merton's intellectual development. Horan, however, digs beneath the surface traced in biographies and studies of his thought. By comparing Merton and St. Francis, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* narrates the growth and ongoing conversion of both men in whom the mystery of God's presence became manifest in sundry ways. From initial response to the call to religious life through years of prayer for and service to the world, their lives were shaped by a vow to poverty that embraced the mystery of *kenosis* – a theological idea cultivated by spiritual discipline, embodied in their persons and active in their social witness. This emptying of oneself was for Merton essential to his monastic life. Beneath the surface of his outward discontents, contradictions and failures, there was the work of God. Note how Merton explains this in *Ascent to Truth*:

contemplation presupposes ascetic action. By this interrelation of the work of intelligence, will, and the rest of our being, contemplation immolates our entire self to God. God is the principal agent in this sublime work. Contemplation is His gift, and He is free to dispose of it as He see fit. It can never, strictly speaking, be merited by any generosity of ours. However, in actual fact, God usually grants this gift to those who are most generous in emptying themselves of every attachment to satisfactions that fall outside the periphery of pure faith. (*AT* 13)

Anthony Padovano's *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton*²¹ is a republication of a book that clearly deserves to remain on the shelves of anyone interested in Merton. Once again, it is a study in the contradictions that converge in creative ways to shape the mind of Merton. While previous works noted above have addressed the apparent disconnects in Merton's life, Padovano digs into them in such a way that the reader sees in Merton's books, journals and poetry the unique vocation of a monk who has puzzled so many for so long. Here is a monk who did not back away from the challenges inherent in his obscure vocation, a vocation that mirrored the perplexing world that was emerging with all its conflicts that threaten the future of humanity. Padovano sets before us Merton as a spiritual genius who set out to reconcile the irreconcilable religious, social and political divisions of the twentieth century.

21. Anthony Padovano, *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton*, Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014); originally published in slightly different form as Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982).

In *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary*,²² Michael Higgins narrates the life of Merton in seven chapters with the art of a storyteller for which he is known. The story moves through the maze of contradictions we have become accustomed to find in Merton. The convergence of opposites, the reconciliation of conflicts and the movement toward a hidden wholeness are reflected in the titles of the seven chapters that serve as mileposts in Merton's journey. For example, "Fixed but Restless," "Abbot Problems" and "Seized Love" address three issues noted earlier in the works of Grayston, Lipsey and Zuercher. In each case, Higgins offers a different perspective as he weaves together an image of a "faithful visionary." As with Horan's book, there is biography here. With that said it must be noted that there is continuous attention to Merton's development as an intellectual in his own right. As Higgins (quoting Robert Lax) rightly notes in his preface, this too was one of his graces shaping the task he offered in service to the world:

I think Merton lifted the level of debate on all philosophical, theological and spiritual matters to a point where it had never been before except in the minds of certain individuals throughout history. This task was always there to be done for the world at large and Merton, following his own light, upward into infinity, with heaven's constant and unflinching help, did it. (xi)

Robert Inchausti's *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times*²³ picks up where *Faithful Vision* ends. He situates Merton in modern world of ideas and from that vantage point reflects on the value of Merton's focus on silence, contemplation and community in a world too noisy and preoccupied with power to be quiet, reflective or united in the wisdom that becomes apparent to those who cultivate a contemplative life. While focused on the intellectual side of Merton's work, Inchausti makes the same point that Higgins does. Inchausti's interest is not the Merton of the past but the Merton "who is still in the process of becoming." That Merton is the one who continues to resonate in the imaginations of those trying to understand the new world that is emerging with its proliferation of converging and clashing ideas – ideas representative of diverse histories, cultures and religious/philosophical traditions.

22. Michael W. Higgins, *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

23. Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014).

Observing Merton's Formation as a Monk for Persons Engaged in Social Issues

In 1958, Merton wrote his first letter to Czeslaw Milosz in which he declared his solidarity with those searching for a *third position* that he describes as “a position of integrity” (*STB* 4). Gordon Oyer’s *Pursuing The Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*²⁴ and Jeffrey Shaw’s *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition*²⁵ provide examples of Merton’s commitment to those interested in discovering alternatives to the self-destructive tendencies of our age. Furthermore, they offer an opportunity to clarify Merton’s relation with the world. Situated as he was on the margins of society, Merton was able to contribute a monastic perspective on current events and issues. As we shall see, he does so in the context of a community for which he has the greatest respect. His desire to think through the pressing issues of our age with others, in collaboration, is most apparent.

While *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* is about a gathering of peace activists at Gethsemani, I found myself focusing on Merton’s facilitation of the retreat. As I did, I became aware of the way in which he had developed as priest and pastor to the group. Jim Forest’s foreword opens with a description of retreats in monastic settings that is also true about Merton as a retreat director:

Since Christian monasticism began to flower in the deserts of Egypt, Sinai, and Palestine in the fourth century AD, millions of people have gone on monastic retreats, and it still goes on. It’s not hard to find those who would welcome a few days of tranquility in a place where the core activity of one’s quiet hosts is worship and prayer.

Many people who seek monastic hospitality say they are there to experience peace. What is truly unusual is for someone, still less a group of people, to seek the shelter of a monastery in hopes of becoming better equipped to be peacemakers, but this is exactly what fourteen people did for three days in November 1964 at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. We used our time together both to explore what we were up against and how best to respond. (xi)

24. Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing The Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*, Foreword by Jim Forest, Afterword by John Dear (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

25. Jeffrey Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

What caught my attention were phrases that suggest that Merton provided *hospitality* that was like a *flower in the desert* where *one's quiet host is worship and prayer* for the *spiritual equipping of peacemakers*. Am I pressing Forest's words too far? I don't believe so but I must admit that Merton's low-key approach at this retreat has to be carefully sifted. The opening paragraph of the third chapter, entitled "Thomas Merton's 'Planning to Have No Plans,'" provides at least a place to begin our inquiry.

Now that dates and the guest list were set, it remained for Merton as host and convener to provide a discussion agenda. He had pushed hard to assure it would not be organized as an academic conference with formal papers and presentations. Still he recognized the need for an element of structure if they would spend their time well, and as the event approached he began to think about how their days together might unfold. While tying down some last-minute logistics with Daniel Berrigan, Merton added to a November 9 letter: "I have been planning to have no plans and to go along quite informally. I hope they are all in a position not to be disconcerted at this and to expect a very free wheeling and unorganized approach. However if you and I are both prepared with ideas it will do no harm. I hope however that it will be a real and authentic opportunity of awakening and new direction for us all and am praying for that." Then two days later on a follow-up note to Berrigan he added a postscript asking that the Jesuit prepare to lead a discussion on some aspect of the "spiritual roots of protest." He would do likewise from a "monastic desert viewpoint." (53)

The informal approach and radical openness indicate the maturing of a spiritual master whose skills, knowledge and wisdom allow him to cultivate a desert experience in which the persons present collaboratively discover in conversation the spiritual roots of protest. By focusing the conversations on the "spiritual roots of protest," Merton offers an opportunity to dig deep into a question that needed to be addressed. The "ecumenical celebration of Mass" that simply happened without discussion witnessed profoundly to their Oneness in Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit; and the location of the retreat, Merton's hermitage, a work in and of itself, long in the making, was and still is a symbol of hospitality for those who resist anything that diminishes the image of God in humanity.

Illusions of Freedom brings together for the reader's consideration the thoughts of Merton and Ellul on technology in the modern world. Following his reading of Ellul, Merton wrote in his journal:

Technology. No! When it comes to taking sides, I am not with [those] who are open mouthed in awe at the “new holiness” of a technological cosmos in which man condescends to be God’s collaborator, and improve everything for Him. Not that technology is per se impious. It is simply neutral and there is no greater nonsense than taking it for an ultimate value. . . . We gain nothing by surrendering to technology as if it were a ritual, a worship, a liturgy (or talking of our liturgy as if it were an expression of the “sacred” supposedly now revealed in technological power). Where impiety is in the hypostatizing of mechanical power as something to do with the Incarnation, as its fulfillment, its epiphany. When it comes to taking sides, I am with Ellul. (*DWL* 166 [quoted in Shaw 5])

This is tough language. Merton’s response stands in marked contrast with the popular opinion. Few would understand his concern. His voice sounds harsh and distant. But there is something in his words that rings true. One simply needs to view ads for the newest technology, visit an Apple Store or take notice of the hold that electronics have over people’s attention. Shaw draws us into this issue. He asks the reader to think deeply about the way our lives are shaped by the technology that we use. The meeting of these two minds between the covers of this book raises a warning for our times – *beware of the illusion of freedom*. Such a warning, however, will go unheeded unless people are aware of another freedom, a deeper freedom than the superficial freedom of choosing among the indeterminate choices presented by the free market. For both men, this other freedom is essential to living an authentic life. From outside of the mainstream of society, they challenge us to think about freedom with reference to our relationship with God. This orients our thinking about freedom in a radically different way than that proposed by modern societies. It is the freedom to be children of God rather than offspring of technology valued only as *human capital* for the workplace. Merton rebelled against this not only in his writings but in the way he chose to live – a choice that was not for him alone but for the world he had come to love.

Morgan Atkinson’s film entitled *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*²⁶ presents an image of a person who, even as an outlaw, had become comfortable with himself and his place in the world. The film narrates Merton’s journey with photos, film clips, readings and interviews that reveal that deeper movement within Merton’s heart that we have already noted. It begins with a newsreel from the 1960s that focuses on

26. Morgan Atkinson, *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton* [DVD] (Louisville, KY: Duckworks, 2014).

those turbulent times – a bomber dropping bombs, lots of bombs, on innocent, defenseless people. Atkinson brings us back to those and similar images of that era again and again. The film then turns our attention to Merton in his hermitage on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 1967. He is recording his evening on a reel-to-reel tape. He tells us that it is 7:00 and he plans to stay up late with his “girlfriend,” Mary Lou Williams, a Kansas City Jazz pianist who can be heard playing in the background. Tom sits alone beside a fire in the hearth. Images of his days in Greenwich Village appear as he recalls years long past. These fade and photo-album images appear and vanish of his mother and father holding him, Tom as an orphan, wild days at Cambridge and Columbia, and finally one of a very young monk. Each photo, black and white with shades of gray, tells the story of a long and difficult search for a place where he would feel at home. At this point, I wonder, the hermitage, the place where he is celebrating the New Year, his last New Year – is this the home he had longed to find? Two images now converge. A photo of Merton in work clothes is laid over another image of a crowd of war protesters. One line stands out, softly spoken by the narrator: “A restless man in a restless time.” This will make for a very complex monk.

This is how the film unfolds. Merton is viewed from multiple perspectives. This invokes an awareness of the opposites that converged in him and required reconciliation. Accusations from the Right of heresy are contrasted with images of devotion and faithfulness. Criticisms from the Left of having retreated from the world are contrasted with his writings on social issues. Conflict with Dom James is contrasted with affirmations by the abbot of Merton’s obedience and opinion that this discontent monk will eventually conform to the will of God. It becomes clear with Atkinson’s account of Merton’s last days that Merton did become a monk who has matured according to his own graces and tasks – graces given by God for a task assigned to him by God. This appears to be confirmed in the film by the Dalai Lama in an interview. Interestingly, here is a confirmation of Merton’s vocation by someone outside the Christian community – confirmation not only of Merton’s graces as a religious but of his task of building bridges between previously divided religions and cultures. Merton has reached the end of his journey and so the film returns us to the hermitage on New Year’s Eve. The reel-to-reel is running out of tape and . . . Merton is not there, and we are alone with our thoughts. This is more than a film about Merton. It is a meditation on the mystery of God’s love in this monk’s life.

Conclusion

Each of the publications considered here sheds light on the question initially raised: "What kind of a monk did Merton become?" Biographical tracings of trajectories in his journey, intellectual development and spiritual formation reveal an interior movement toward a "hidden wholeness"²⁷ that, while on the surface it appears unstable and conflicted, represents the life-long commitment of a young novice to the monastic life and his search for personal transformation via conversion to the monastic way of life. Several thoughts converged: the goal of Merton's life to restore the Image of God in the world, his commitment to overcome the divisions of the world *within* himself and finally, the unexpected vanishing from our view.

Merton's search led him to a study of classic texts both from his own tradition and beyond. A text from India resonated with what he had earlier discovered in his own tradition. Merton's essay entitled "The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita," initially published in 1968 as a preface to *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is*²⁸ and later as Appendix IX in the *Asian Journal*, reveals the last trajectory of his journey and something of importance with regard to his final formation:

To live without this illuminated consciousness is to live as a beast of burden, carrying one's life with tragic seriousness as a huge, incomprehensible weight (see Camus' interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus). The weight of the burden is the seriousness with which one takes one's own individual and separate self. To live with the true consciousness of life centered in Another is to lose one's self-important seriousness and thus live life as "play" in union with a Cosmic Player. It is He alone that one takes seriously. But to take Him seriously is to find joy and spontaneity in everything, for everything is gift and grace. In other words, to live selfishly is to bear life as an intolerable burden. To live selflessly is to live in joy, realizing by experience that life itself is love and gift. To be a lover and a giver is to be a channel through which the Supreme Giver manifests His love in the world.²⁹

27. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); CP 363.

28. *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is*, trans. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami (New York: Macmillan, 1968) 18-22.

29. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 350; subsequent references will be cited as "AJ" parenthetically in the text.

Donald Grayston clarifies what this “illuminated consciousness” meant to Merton in his lifelong search for God:

This is a personal and spiritual knowing, not a propositional or informational knowing. For the monk, the ascent to this salvific knowledge is a lifelong process, a continuing search for ways in which he may participate in “the restoration of the cosmos to its primitive state,” a *conversio/conversatio morum*, or as Merton often says in other contexts, the recovery of paradise. (Grayston 210)

Drawing from Merton’s comment on the *Gita* and Grayston’s reflections on Merton, we catch a glimpse of the interior movement of Merton’s life that played out in his monastic journey. This journey involved the convergence of his personal life and relations, the influence of numerous writers, artists and theologians, conversations and correspondence with representatives from other religious traditions, the years at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and his awareness of contemporary social and environmental issues. While all of this must be taken into consideration, it is that deeper and somewhat ineffable movement within the heart of Merton that endured and engaged the polarities and contradictions, shortcomings and failures, illusions and disillusionment, internal and interpersonal conflicts in the slow process of losing oneself in the Other.

What kind of monk did Merton become? It appears that Merton became the kind of monk intended in the *Rule* of St. Benedict and noted at the outset of this essay. There is, however, something different about this monk, something about his own graces and task that are summarized in his last words spoken in public. He became the kind of monk who vanishes and has left us so much more than time for a coke. This vanishing at the end of his life is of significance when understood with regard to the sacred. A sand mandala is created and then erased. A yogi creates a sacred space and then lets it go. A trickster appears, does the necessary job and vanishes. In each case, the vanishing results in the awareness that the sacred is nowhere and now everywhere. Merton is no longer in view but those graces that were at work within his heart are present whenever and wherever his words are read.

Rowan Williams understands the significance of this vanishing act. Reflecting on Merton’s ironic statement: “I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He’s dead. Father Louis – he’s half-dead too.”³⁰ Williams wrote:

30. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 253.

Merton will not *let* me look at him for long: he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking. That is one reason why this is a short article. I don't want to know much more about Merton; he is dead, and I shall commend him regularly, lovingly, and thankfully to God. I am concerned to find how I can turn further in the direction he is looking, in prayer, poetry, theology, and encounter with the experience of other faiths; in trust and love of God our saviour.³¹

While Merton's life is of sufficient interest to keep scholars busy for some time, his importance lies far beyond him. Here was a man whose life reveals an authentic path to sainthood, not a censored version, not a plastic figurine, not a blissful iconic image, but a *Trampist* hanging on the side of a boxcar – perhaps the only representative of religious life that is believable in this post-Christian era. From the boxcar, is he waving goodbye or waving us to follow? I believe it is the latter, and therein lies the importance of Merton's life and work.

While the question of the mature Merton is of importance, I am of the opinion that an even more significant question unfolds: what kind of community has emerged and matured from Merton's life and work? This seems to me to be essential to understanding and appreciating the Merton legacy. If you understand Merton as a trickster, it is not what he did but what he has caused to happen. The trickster typically breaks open new horizons and then disappears, leaving everyone with questions that invoke seemingly endless conversations of a new order, for a new era, opening new horizons for religious life in the twenty-first century.

During the centenary, four publications stand out as representing the community that Merton left behind and the conversations in which that community is engaged. There was the previous volume of *The Merton Annual* that gathered a group of international scholars to address a question raised by Czeslaw Milosz regarding Merton's vision of the world redeemed in Christ. The special issue of *The Merton Seasonal* focused on the theme "Why Merton Still Matters"³² provided members of the international community an opportunity to contribute short articles on this topic; forty-three reflections were gathered, arranged alphabetically beginning with Lars Adolfsson and ending with Monica Weis. The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland published a special expanded edition of *The Merton Journal* entitled *Universal Vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton – European Perspectives from*

31. Rowan Williams, *Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 19.

32. *The Merton Seasonal* 40.1 (Spring 2015).

*The Merton Journal*³³ that offered an arrangement of articles, poetry and previously unpublished work by Merton (three writings with cartoons from his years at Cambridge) that witness to the international interest in Merton. It provides an important reminder that Merton's roots were in Europe – roots that eventually matured into a monk with a universal vision for humanity. Finally, *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope – Reflections to Honor His Centenary (1915-2015)*³⁴ sets before us personal reflections of over a hundred friends and admirers of Merton. While some are by those who knew him personally, most are by those who have come to know him through his writings. Each voice and all the voices together honor Merton by witnessing to a truth that was central to his writings. The fact that “we are already one” (see *AJ* 308) gives all of us reason to serve the world with courage born out of hope in the same sign that marked Merton's life, the sign of Jonas.

33. *Universal Vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton – European Perspectives from the Merton Journal* edited with an Introduction by Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis, Foreword by Paul M. Pearson, 21.2 (Advent 2014).

34. *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope – Reflections to Honor His Centenary (1915-2015)* edited by Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, Foreword by Paul M. Pearson (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014).