Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes: Perspectives from the Vancouver Conference

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The Eighth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society held in Vancouver in June of 2003 attracted a robust response to its theme, "The Hawk's Dream: Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes." The title is an allusion to a favorite poem of Merton's by Robinson Jeffers, the rugged Californian poet with whom Merton was taken in the late sixties, especially when he visited the Monastery of the Redwoods on the West Coast in 1968. Merton's sacred landscapes captured the imagination of presenters from all hemispheres of the globe, reflecting Merton's own wide-ranging geographic, intellectual and spiritual spheres of inquiry and insight. In this volume of *The Merton Annual,* ten of the presenters have honed their papers into articles which broaden the discussions undertaken at that meeting. It has been very rewarding and enlightening to work closely and collegially as a guest editor with these writers whose disciplines and expertise lend new and careful thought about Merton as a figure of influence in the past and present centuries.

Deborah Kehoe explores three of Merton's early poems with intelligent sensitivity and graceful eloquence. Each of the poems begins with vivid sensory details describing specific features of the monastery at Gethsemani. This study reveals that the poems move beyond the physical realm, however, to recreate the poet's metaphysical encounters with a plane of existence in which perfection, unity, and peace are realized.

Angus Stuart also focuses on the relationship between inner space and the sense of place in the geography of solitude, exploring an amplitude of texts from Merton's substantial writings on this subject, especially in the late sixties. Thomas Merton's experience is juxtaposed on that of the Beat poets, who occupied themselves as Fire Lookouts in the North Cascade Mountains of America during the mid-1950s.

Gray Matthews combines his interest in American philosopher, Henry Bugbee, with his reading of Merton to suggest a possible dialogue of ideas between these two American contemplative thinkers and writers. Their mutual indebtedness to the wisdom of Meister Eckhart, Henry David Thoreau, Daisetz Suzuki, Max Picard and Gabriel Marcel testifies to the fact that Merton and Bugbee were working on many of the same ideas in relation to contemporary culture. Matthews' scholarly intensity and discipline provide us with a fine and rewarding study and an excellent research source.

Ron Dart continues this method of inquiry by making a comparison of worldview principles between Merton and the significant Canadian contemplative philosopher and iconoclast, George Grant. The two were contemporaries and although of very different personal histories, they proffer many of the same illuminations about societal and personal responsibility in relation to the church and the world.

Edward K. Kaplan, renowned Jewish scholar from Brandeis University, offers a compelling and profound reading of Merton's receptivity to the feminine, Judaism and religious pluralism. Kaplan's intellectually stimulating and sophisticated prose examines this enormous topic with deftness and perceptivity. He posits that later in life Merton reintegrated the "feminine" within himself, as is demonstrated by his seminars with the Sisters of Loretto and his love of "Margie"; these were foreshadowed by Merton's fantasized relationship with "Proverb" and his opening to Judaism. Kaplan finds parallels between the Shekhinah and the Virgin Mary in Merton's writing and experience.

In his analysis of Merton's famous diarized essay, "Fire Watch," **David Leigh SJ** dialogues with Ross Labrie's conference presentation, "The Unanswered Question in Thomas Merton's 'Fire Watch.'" Although Labrie's paper does not appear in this volume, it has been published in *Christianity and Literature* (2003) and might well be read in concert with Professor Leigh's article which here explores dimensions of Merton's use of fire and water imagery in his journals, autobiography and poetry, as expressions of purification, the desire for contemplation, and the painful consolation of the divine presence in human experience.

From the perspective of Asian studies, **Patrick Bludworth** explores Merton's "outlaw lineage" in relation to the desert fathers and Asian masters. His article discovers possible stages by which

Merton became convinced that the key to unlocking the treasures of Christian as well as Asian spiritual traditions was the institution of the guru; that Merton recognized great value in the teacher-disciple relationships that existed among the Christian Desert Fathers and which continue to exist within various Asian traditions.

The subsequent article by **Joe Raab** offers "some notes" on Merton's epiphany at Polonnaruwa—one of the more studied and significant of Merton's enlightenments because of its location in his Asian journey and its proximity to the time of his death. As Raab sees it, within Merton there is a complementary interpenetration of contexts, Buddhist and Christian, but that his interest in the former always included the faith commitments he had made within the latter. Merton's contemplative Catholicism provided him with a place from which to move into the Buddhist world; a first language with which to correlate meanings within a new linguistic frame of reference.

This collection of revised conference papers nets a human interest story, as well, with **Kenelm Burridge's** summary of his anthropologist's view of Merton and the Cargo Cults. What is of singular interest here is that Burridge's book, *Mambu: A Melanesian Millenium* (1960) actually prompted Merton to write his well-known essay on the cargo cults of the South Pacific which from the nineteenth to well into the middle of the last century have been interpreted psychologically, sociologically, and as "derivatives of Christian outpouring."

The last word is left to **Paul Dekar** who returns us to the present moment with his exploration of Merton and technology, "What the Machine Produces and What the Machine Destroys." As Dekar interprets Merton, technology must be approached with wisdom and applied with caution. It emerges as a sustained force, contributing to the distortion, distraction and denial of our condition, and fostering alienation and even placing human survival at risk.