

to a boy and a young man in love with and incredibly sensitive to places. In 1941, the young man sank his roots into the rich physical and spiritual soil of Gethsemani and for the rest of his life fostered the habits of heart and mind that in their attentiveness to the unique qualities of different places challenged modernism's attempt to make all space homogeneous. In a world where space has become "disenchanted and profane" and every place "opened up to exploitation" (Smith 208), Merton reminds us of the beauty, integrity and sacredness of natural places and with vivid language reimagines a hierophanous world.

Attentive to his surroundings, present to landscape and open to its nuances, Merton came to experience the "power of place," writes Weis. This strengthened his "habit of awareness" and led to a deep coherence "between the external landscape and the landscape of the heart" (39). This coherence included the natural inhabitants of place and awakened his conscience, for the spatial metaphors of an ethics of place imply "*giving others room* to develop and not *shaping* their existence solely for our own instrumental ends" (Smith 219) – in short, allowing space for the significance of the other to emerge. Positively, it means protecting and promoting the potential of others to "maintain their differences and create their own space for development" (Smith 219). A rich description of place and its *in-habitants*, as one finds in Merton, "helps us to get a feeling for the meaning of this ethics" (Smith 218). The reader's attentive engagement is important for this *heartfelt* ethics.

Monica Weis has obviously developed such a feeling through her sensitive reading of Thomas Merton and has crafted her work in such a way as to share her experience with her readers and to invite us to plunge into Merton's works. Hopefully, through a *care-full* reading of her work and his, we will grow in our own sensitivity to and care for places and for the natural (and human) beings with whom we share this one planetary home (*oikos*). In short, may Monica Weis's wonderful study awaken in us an ecological consciousness and conscience. This would, indeed, be a much needed and significant contribution – and an act of radical ecology.

Donald P. St. John

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Not all new books on Thomas Merton should be greeted with "joyous acclamation" (as the happy phrase of the Easter anthem of my youth put it). Sr. Monica's book should be so greeted because

it is a genuinely engaging analysis of Merton's spirituality from the fresh, new perspective of his growing ecological awareness and subsequent call for eco-justice. This is not just another study of Merton's nature writing (of which there are several excellent examples, some by Weis herself), but a work that constructs a sturdy bridge between his nature writing and his concern for social justice. As Sr. Monica clearly states, "Merton's aesthetic response to the beauty of his landscape moves toward ethical response and a cry for justice" (136). In what follows I highlight three aspects of the book I find particularly helpful or noteworthy, then note two things that make me uneasy, the lesser an assertion by Sr. Monica and the greater an attitude of Merton's which I find perplexing.

First, in her exposition of Merton's "ecological consciousness" (151), Weis treats practically the whole range of Merton's writing. That, in itself, is a considerable achievement. She grounds her book in examination of specific and important places in Merton's life (chapter 2) and spotlights some of his significant "moments of awakening" (chapter 3). In doing so she relies primarily on Merton's autobiographical writing. Chapter 4 describes Merton's "poetic eye" and introduces the ways that, for him, inner and outer landscapes merged (chapter 5). To do so she includes Merton's autobiographical work (did she count the "1,800 nature references in . . . Merton's journals"? [71]), spiritual writing, poetry and photography. Reading the book gives entrée not only to Merton's ecological thinking, but nearly to the whole body of his work. It is an introduction to the whole from careful examination of a part. And this leads to my second observation.

The book demonstrates how reference to a touchstone work can focus a whole range of material. A close reading of Merton's January 12, 1963 letter to Rachel Carson opens the book (9-21). Weis returns to that letter toward its close as, in chapter 6, she ties together the threads of her argument. Without belaboring the point, Weis shows us just how important Carson's work was to Merton, how he "acknowledges its wider, even cosmic, significance" (128). Weis demonstrates how "[e]mbedded in Merton's letter to Rachel Carson are three strands of his deepening spirituality: awareness and a keen eye for the beauty and the holiness or 'sacramentality' of nature, a deepening realization of our kinship and harmony with nature, and a growing sense of compassion and responsibility for all creation" (132). Carson's book focused Merton's thought on ecology, and Weis has skillfully mined his letter in response to it

for the structure and unifying principle of her own study.

Third, this is a beautifully produced book. In an age of digital doo-dads, it is a particular pleasure to hold a well-produced book. The jacket design is inviting (appropriate for Merton the photographer); the type face is attractive and of a size to be easily readable. The apparatus of the book includes not only an extensive bibliography, but (oh, glory!) an index. Best of all, its thesis is supported by 14 illustrations (many Merton's own photographs) and a map of Gethsemani. Having visited the places of which she writes, Weis knows the importance of "what it looked like" to understanding what happened.<sup>1</sup> As the book attests, knowledge and love of landscape can lead to a sense of moral (and as Fr. James Conner's Foreword asserts, theological) responsibility for it.

I have tried to make clear that I am delighted by Sr. Monica's original (and that's saying something) contribution to Merton studies. My one, miniscule difficulty should be read in the context of enormous admiration for the work. It is a problem I have not only with this study, but with a similar tendency on the part of several Merton scholars. The matter which troubles me occurs in the final chapter as Weis ties together the strands of her very convincing argument. It goes like this "*had Merton lived beyond December 10, 1968, he would have been in the vanguard of contemporary nature writers and environmentalists*" (152-53; emphasis added); again on the following page occurs: "Had Merton lived beyond December 1968, he probably would have . . ." (154).

Admittedly, Weis documents why she thinks "Merton would have." But can we really know with any certainty what he might have done? Merton was a mercurial figure. As early as December 10, 1949, he quotes Rilke as saying: "I am the impression that will change."<sup>2</sup> In a prayer in *Thoughts in Solitude* he says, "I am a transient expression of Your inexhaustible and eternal reality."<sup>3</sup> "Transient" implies "not fixed." Part of our fascination with Merton is certainly the number of ways and times he "reinvented" himself (if he could, we might). In any case, God's call to Christians is to

1. In her Preface to Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), Kathleen Norris perceptively notes that Merton's "poems are the fruit of listening" (xv). I think that as a good son of St. Benedict, Merton writes his best poems from "listening with the ear of his heart."

2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 248.

3. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 71.

change, to be “transformed” into the Lord’s likeness. And the monastic vocation (among other things) is a call to *conversatio morum*, and conversion implies “change.” But human nature being the variable and mysterious thing it is, it makes me squirmy to second-guess the dead. Had Merton died after writing *The Seven Storey Mountain* would we have surmised he would have become the ecumenist and pioneer of inter-religious dialogue he was?

This brings me to my final point and larger problem, which is with Merton, not Weis. Despite the fact that Merton’s early years were spent in rural France, that his secondary schooling in England (not treated in chapter 2) was in a lovely, rural area, and that half of his life (27 of his almost 54 years) were spent in rural Kentucky, his attitude to nature was essentially that of a “city boy.” It was a romantic view of nature, like that of my urban friends who visit and wax eloquent about the deer (*pace* to Weis’ Afterword, “Woodland Deer”) that roam across my property without considering the menace they are to crops and fruit trees and automobiles and life here in West Virginia, which ranks number one in America for car-deer collisions.

Sr. Monica does raise this issue in discussing Merton’s ability to see the holy in the ordinary. She writes, “What about the horror of nature . . . ? Doesn’t Merton acknowledge the other, cruel side . . . ?” (76). It was the question explicitly raised by Czeslaw Milosz, with whom Merton began a correspondence in 1958. Weis cites his February 28, 1960 letter to Merton in which the Polish poet (quite accurately) notes, “Every time you speak of Nature, it appears to you as soothing, rich in symbols, as a veil or a curtain. You do not pay much attention to torture and suffering in Nature” (76).

I find Merton’s response either fatuous or embarrassingly naive or both. He responded, “I am in complete and deep complicity with nature, or imagine I am: nature and I are very good friends, and console one another for the stupidity and the infamy of the human race and its civilization” (76). I can’t imagine his consolation comes in the audible cry of a rabbit in the talons of a raptor (an image of the reality of the “natural” food chain), or in the rather diabolical life of spiders, or in other gruesome “natural” events with which country persons could regale city persons. Merton continues, “I am perfectly aware that the spider eats the fly. . . . Spiders have always eaten flies. . . . I don’t find it in myself to generate any horror for nature or a feeling of evil in it” (76-77). Could it be that Merton (like most of us) sees what he looks for, or

for some psychological reason of his own, must cling to nature as always Edenic? I don't know. I do know that if one lives close to nature she doesn't have to "generate horror." It generally drags its mangled self across her landscape.

Whether nature is totally benign or manifests evil is not the point. The point is articulated by Fr. Conner in the Foreword: Merton's awareness deepened that "creation [was] a manifestation of God" (ix). Weis makes a convincing case that, for Merton, "What begins as attention to God's transcendence transforms into recognition of God's immanence" (103). She quotes Merton's friend, Anglican priest and scholar A. M. (Donald) Allchin, that God "com[es] to be with us where we are that we may come to be with him where he is" (97). The language may not be inclusive, but the message is clear. To destroy the natural world (in its beauty and brutality) is to destroy one of the "books" in which God writes large. To destroy the natural world is to destroy not only a gift from God, but, in some very direct way, a means of knowing the Giver. An "ecological conscience" is "essentially a peace-making conscience" (149). But it is also ever so much more.

Bonnie Thurston

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*The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* is the first substantive book-length study of Merton's pervasive and prophetic consciousness of environmental degradation unfolding in his lifetime – a clairvoyant warning of what is coming to term in our own. For over a decade, Monica Weis has trained her well-honed literary scholarship on the emergent features of Merton's ecological concern, spelled out in a number of explorative essays originally brought to audience and readership in various Merton presentations and publications. In this volume, with a handful of interlacing metaphors, she seamlessly weaves together these several studies into an integrated work of creative originality and in a voice that speaks directly and personally to the reader. One such metaphor that opens Weis' exposition is "Dancing with the Raven" (1-8), her playful way of bowing to Merton's paradoxical nature. With an incantatory delineation of the features of this richly mythologized, shape-shifting bird, Weis summons Merton's totemic spirit to guide her in tracing his spiritual itinerary into the heart of creation.

The central metaphors which fasten her mosaic of Merton's ecological realization are those that iterate elements of "vision":