

## 2012 Bibliographic Review Essay Thomas Merton, Escape Artist

---

*David Joseph Belcastro*

“In times like these, escape is the only way  
to stay alive and keep dreaming.”

Henry Laborit

### Introduction

I first came upon the above quotation by Laborit while viewing *Mediterraneo*. The film opens with this line as an epigraph providing the viewer with a particular focus on the story that follows. Gabriele Salvatores' antiwar film takes place on a Greek island where a unit of Italian soldiers find refuge after their ship is sunk by the British during the Second World War. As the line suggests, their escape from the insanity of war brings them to a place where life is restored, the deepest dimensions of human experience are explored, and the lives of men and villagers are allowed to naturally flourish.

It so happened that the viewing of this film and my reading of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* converged, and in such a way to suggest the title and composition of this essay. Taylor views the modern world as “the final triumph of the Hollow Men, who, knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing, had lost the ability to *feel* or *think* deeply about anything.” That loss, he believes, contributed significantly to the construction of flat societies that are “confining, even stifling” of human life. All this, Taylor points out, eventually “led some prominent converts to break out of it.” He identifies two of those converts: Thomas Merton and Jacques Maritain.<sup>1</sup>

This “breaking out” eventually became the hallmark of Merton's vocation. Consequently, it is appropriate to post the line from Laborit as an epigraph to this essay, thereby providing the reader with a perspective on the books under review in this volume of *The Merton Annual* and briefly noted here. These books published in 2012 address various aspects of Merton's escape from the multiple confinements that incarcerate the human spirit.

We begin with Merton's formation as a monk and author. For Merton

---

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 734.

the work of prayer and writing drew upon three commitments: the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, the current affairs of the modern world and his formation as a Trappist monk in that world.<sup>2</sup> With the new publications of Merton's talks and essays on contemplation, as well as articles that clarify his relation to the world, we are invited to consider the nature and purpose of his unique vocation. Even though his interior life was formed in the silence and solitude of a monastic tradition, his work took place in collaboration with men and woman outside and far beyond the cloistered walls of the abbey. We once again find an interesting collection of publications that focus on friends with whom Merton shared the search for freedom, friendships that formed a solidarity of resistance and hope for a new world. Next, we turn to two publications that represent two of the many confinements from which Merton escaped—the emerging age of technology and the well-established puritanical world of porn.<sup>3</sup> In neither case do we find a rejection of either modern technology or human sexuality. On the contrary, Merton's escape is never simply an escape *from* confinement but an escape *to* new possibilities in which the human spirit is free to thrive. Finally, one last work represents a genre often overlooked: compilations of Merton texts can be too easily dismissed as simply that and nothing more. *Precious Thoughts* provides an opportunity to reappraise our opinion of “fabricated” books. Here we find a publication that continues Merton's legacy of integrating past traditions with concerns for the modern world and the formation of interior life—*our* interior lives as each of us searches for the freedom that is necessary for living authentically.

### Formation

Oscar Wilde wrote, “Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.” While the statement strikes one as true, it raises questions regarding the vocation of teaching. What is intended when a person assumes the role of teacher in a classroom? What is considered worth knowing? What kind of knowing is implied? Clearly for Wilde it is more than the transmission of information from teacher to student. Perhaps Wilde is suggesting that true learning occurs only when the inquiry is *shared* by both teacher and student, in such a way that both are opened to discovering in their own

---

2. See Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) xiv.

3. “Puritanical world of porn” refers to the state of sexuality in today's world. It is the result of a puritanical understanding of sex as “unclean” and the porn industry's response to market demands, albeit hidden, for “dirty” sex books and films. In other words, sexuality in the modern world has been ill-defined and significantly limited by the convergence of these two opposing forces.

experiences that which is worth knowing. As one listens to Merton's talks on old cassette tapes or new CDs<sup>4</sup> or reads the six volumes of notes for those talks, one immediately recognizes that Merton's integrated approach to teaching flows out of his experience with religious traditions, sacred and secular texts and the contemplative life. Thus the talks represent both his gift to others and his own inquiry, an inquiry that was less about information and more about formation, his own and that of those he addressed.

Patrick O'Connell has committed his fine skills and comprehensive knowledge of Merton to the daunting task of editing Merton's monastic conferences. During the past decade, O'Connell has edited five volumes of talks on initiation into the monastic tradition.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, Cistercian Publications released the sixth volume, *The Life of the Vows*.<sup>6</sup> While previous volumes in this series provide readers an opportunity to observe the pastoral concern of Merton at work as spiritual master and teacher, this new addition to the series underscores the importance of vows that shaped not only the lives of the monks under his care but Merton's vocation and perspective on the world he sought to serve. Even though the talks represent a pre-Vatican II understanding of monasticism, they are nonetheless of importance to both scholars and general readers of Merton.

This valuable contribution to the Merton corpus offers scholars notes previously unpublished. The indices are a helpful aid to researchers who hope to gain a true, deep and multifaceted understanding of Merton's thoughts on issues ranging from *abandonment* to *Zebedee, sons of*. Merton's threefold commitment to the ancient traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, the cultural and religious diversity of the contemporary world and the formation of persons in Christ prepared to serve that world is most evident in these notes that represent dedicated hours of preparation. And

---

4. See the review by Patrick O'Connell of the recent release of CDs by Now You Know Media in this volume of *The Merton Annual*.

5. See Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, Monastic Wisdom [MW] vol. 1 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005); Thomas Merton, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 2*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 9 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006); Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 13 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008); Thomas Merton, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 4*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 19 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2009); Thomas Merton, *Monastic Observances: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 5*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 25 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010).

6. Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 6*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 30 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012); subsequent references will be cited as "LV" parenthetically in the text.

of course, the notes witness to his impressive capacity to think deeply about everything, questioning everything, and thereby cultivating within his students the growth and formation needed for their lives as monks.

This formation is of both private and public significance. Each monk accepts these vows in the solitude of a monastic cell for the purpose of restoring an authentic identity in the divine image. While this is done alone, the intention of the vows is not confinement from the world but freedom to love the world. That is to say, the vows are the disciplines necessary to escape the binding vices that imprison the human spirit and thereby prevent a virtuous life from flourishing in the freedom of God's grace. It is on this point that the importance of this book for the general reader becomes clear. Inside or outside the monastery, the task of and obstacles to formation in Christ is an ever-present challenge. This Merton knew and appreciated. Consequently, his vocation required him to climb over the walls of his own monastic enclosure to assist laypersons in their lives in Christ. Resisting those who believed that the contemplative life was limited to a select few, Merton's instructions on formation became public, his pastoral concern for restoring our true identity in Christ became public, his call to life emancipated from the seemingly endless entrapments of the world became public. Of course, we must keep in mind the original audience of these particular talks, i.e. cloistered monks. Even so, we will find in these notes moments when Merton's voice extends beyond a classroom in the monastery on a given day:

the religious state is one in which men and women give themselves exclusively to the love and service of God, in lives totally impregnated with prayer and sacrifice. There are many different kinds of religious observance—some active, some contemplative, some apostolic; all have this in common—that they are consecrated to God exclusively and permanently and that this consecration is offered predominantly in a spirit of sacrifice and prayer, and the ones who are thus called seek to make themselves perfect in the friendship of God by love. (*LV* 107)

As we move on to the next two books under consideration, a passage by Merton included at the outset of *On Christian Contemplation* provides a link to the previous paragraph. Merton writes:

Can contemplation still find a place in the world of technology and conflict which is ours? Does it belong only to the past? The answer to this is that, since the direct and pure experience of reality in its ultimate root is man's deepest need, contemplation must be possible if man is to remain human. If contemplation is no longer possible,

then man's life has lost the spiritual orientation upon which everything else—order, peace, happiness, sanity—must depend. But true contemplation is an austere and exacting vocation. Those who seek it are few and those who find it fewer still. Nevertheless, their presence [bears] witness to the fact that contemplation remains both necessary and possible.<sup>7</sup>

*On Christian Contemplation* and *On Eastern Meditation*<sup>8</sup> are compilations of Merton's thoughts on the nature and purpose of contemplation in the modern world and the importance of being open to the wisdom that is offered by Eastern traditions on meditation. Together, they represent an important aspect of Merton's endeavor to scale the walls of history that separate East and West. While one may rightfully read these books as meditations on prayer, at a deeper level they represent Merton's endeavor to liberate humankind from those destructive conflicts that divide humanity into opposing camps. Along with his Asian pilgrimage, these writings witness to his commitment to unite within himself every division within the world and thereby awaken within humanity an awareness of the contemplative dimension wherein is discovered the essential oneness of all humanity in the Hidden Ground of Love.

One might ask, is there anything new here? Bonnie Thurston, editor of *On Eastern Meditation*, expresses some reservations regarding the compiling of excerpts out of context, but finds reassurance in remembering Merton's similar practice in *The Wisdom of the Desert*, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* and *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (xvi). Even so, the weaving together of texts can be something of a challenge to the reader. As Mark Meade notes in his review of these two books published in this volume of *The Merton Annual*, there is some frustration with and slight confusion from constantly looking up the references when one is interested in the original context of the passage. These concerns are of course valid. There is, however, another way to approach these books. Recall for example that *The Rule of St. Benedict* is a compilation. This is also true for *Patanjali's Yoga Sutras*. While weaving together texts from the past, both compositions stand on their own and have provided an invaluable service to the life of various religious communities throughout history. These were texts that drew on collective wisdom of the past with the intention of creating a text that would engage new generations in the ongoing exploration of

---

7. Thomas Merton, *On Christian Contemplation* edited with a preface by Paul M. Pearson (New York: New Directions, 2012) 5.

8. Thomas Merton, *On Eastern Meditation* edited with an introduction by Bonnie Thurston (New York: New Directions, 2012).

the spiritual dimensions of the human experience.

Could the same be said of these two publications? I believe so. First, they are skillfully edited. In other words, neither is simply a filing of Merton excerpts with little or no attention to the overall composition. Pearson's and Thurston's arrangements, while different, are carefully crafted. Since both editors provide clear explanations of their formats in the introductions, I will say nothing more here other than to stress the importance of taking the time to understand and appreciate the *new* approaches to and presentations of Merton's thoughts on contemplation. Even though there is something new here, it is important to underscore a second point. Both books were edited by scholars who know their Merton. In other words, the works are, from an academic point of view, solid. There is no misrepresentation of Merton's thought. On the contrary, I imagine that Merton would recognize in Pearson and Thurston kindred souls with whom he shares much in common. There is one significance difference, however, between the editors and Merton. So a third point: the times have changed. While both editors are committed to the Merton legacy, they are also concerned with a new generation that may find in Merton what they need to live the Christian life in the twenty-first century. As Pearson explains, the purpose of *On Christian Contemplation*

is to encourage the reader on their spiritual journey and, for those new to the work of Thomas Merton, to open up some of the insights of this modern spiritual master. It should not be read as a manual or textbook on the life of prayer but as a "primer" on meditation and contemplation to be read, as Merton himself suggests, "quietly" and "in such a way that when you get something to chew on you stop and chew" in the manner of *lectio divina*, spiritual reading. (xiv)

These are books for the *new monastics* seeking guidance for their journeys in an age of revolutionary change. As such, they contribute to the Merton legacy by addressing the question raised above by Merton in the affirmative: "Can contemplation still find a place in the world of technology and conflict which is ours?"

As noted previously in this essay, it is impossible to address Merton's formation of young monks and laypersons without becoming aware that we are also observing the formation of his vocation. ***Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge***,<sup>9</sup> co-edited by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart, presents various perspectives on Merton's vocation that converge to highlight his place in the modern world. For Merton to be fully appreciated and

---

9. *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* edited by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (North Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012).

understood it is necessary to clarify the location and importance of his hermitage, a hermitage that now transcends the monastic grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani and thereby serves the world in a way recognized, obscurely perhaps, on the edge. What that means becomes clear as one reads through the Introduction, ten articles and concluding Afterword. Each piece reveals a different insight into Merton's view of the world from the edge, a view that is desperately needed as humanity finds its way into a new millennium.

Paul Dekar's article entitled "Technology and the Loss of Paradise" begins by focusing attention on Merton's hermitage. For Merton, Dekar explains, "The hermitage was paradise on earth where he could recover his truest personhood" (65). If viewed in light of Ross Labrie's Introduction to this volume, it is clear that the hermitage was also a breaking out of the institutional inertia of Christianity that affirmed rather than challenged the status quo of the modern world (9). The juxtaposition of these two images, paradise on earth and breaking out, may seem at first glance contrary to everything that we know about Merton. Even so, it is a common misunderstanding of monks and hermits as individuals who create a paradise of their own in an effort to escape the harsh realities of this world. This, however, is not the case with Merton. *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* corrects this misunderstanding and thereby establishes the need for monks and hermits who live on the edge. Merton's flight from the world to this remote location was not a withdrawal from society and its problems but was rather intended, as Michael Higgins points out in his article entitled "Prophecy and Contemplation," to bring something to the world that was missing.

The issues facing the modern world are sufficiently complex and perplexing to require an outsider's perspective. The hermitage provided that. Within the walls of this cinderblock building, Merton's interest in the world expanded, rather than contracted. As one simply scans the titles of the articles in this collection, one becomes aware of a monk whose years as a student at Columbia University situated him, as Stuart's article on "Merton and the Beats" points out, within the counter-culture movement of the Beats. While Merton's road trip from New York stopped at Gethsemani, he would eventually make the pilgrimage to City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. Consequently, we should not be surprised to find on the bookshelf in the hermitage works by Albert Camus, a writer greatly respected by Merton and the Beats. Labrie's article entitled "Merton on Atheism in Camus" shows the seriousness with which Merton wrestled with the theological turmoil of the 1960s that drew into question the existence of God. What more needs to be said? This paradise on earth was a busy place. Ron Dart's

“Peacemaker,” Ryan Scrugg’s “Merton and Interreligious Dialogue” and Dekar’s already mentioned article on technology reveal the hermitage as a center for interreligious dialogue, an observation post for environmental studies and a retreat house for peace activists.

The root cause of the problems facing the modern world is to be found in the heart of humanity. To address these problems, a person is required who understands what troubles the human spirit. Merton’s life formed by the *Rule* of Benedict provided this. And it was a perspective of the world gained from years of discipline that he brought to the world. His vision, mystical and apocalyptic, provides a way out of the prison the modern world created for itself. It is a vision of the world redeemed in Christ. That vision is skillfully teased out by Michael Higgin in “Prophecy and Contemplation,” Susan McCaslin in “Merton’s Mystical Visions: a Widening Circle,” Bruce Ward in “Apocalypse and Modernity,” Donald Grayston in “Merton in Asia: The Polonnaruwa Illumination” and Lynn Szabo in “The Mystical Ecology of Merton’s Poetics.”

### Collaborators

Merton’s attempts to escape were executed in collaboration with accomplices who also sought freedom. At the center of this endeavor was his capacity for deep and abiding friendships. The opening articles and interview in this volume of *The Merton Annual* bring to our attention the friendship that existed between Merton and James Laughlin. This and other relationships were personally important for Merton and essential to his intention to find an authentic way of *being* in the modern world. As Merton explains in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz dated May 21, 1959:

as far as solidarity with other people goes, I am committed to nothing except a very simple and elemental kind of solidarity, which is perhaps without significance politically, but which is I feel the only kind which works at all. That is to pick out the people whom I recognize in a crowd and hail them and rejoice with them for a moment that we speak the same language. Whether they be communists or whatever else they may be. Whatever they may believe on the surface, whatever may be the formulas to which they are committed. I am less and less worried by what people say or think they say: and more and more concerned with what they and I are able to be.<sup>10</sup>

The publications noted below draw our attention to persons with whom Merton found a “simple and elemental kind of solidarity.” These friend-

---

10. *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* edited with an introduction by Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997) 40.

ships not only enriched his life but indicate the crossing of social and religious divisions. This statement needs qualification. You will notice that one of the reviews includes a person Merton never met. I will return to this point at the end of this essay when we consider another book in which we are able to observe the ongoing collaboration of Merton with “friends” he would never meet. Perhaps death is another confinement from which it can be said Merton escaped?

*Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship*<sup>11</sup> and *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life*<sup>12</sup> are new additions to the publications regarding Merton's relations with women. While the first book is, as the title indicates, a story of their friendship, the second focuses on Levertov's life with only four references to Merton. Even so, it is clear that both women contributed in various ways to Merton's life and work. Lentfoehr's attention to Merton's writings as his first archivist and self-appointed publicist is notable. Their exchange of materials and letters was impressive. And while the friendship was mutually beneficial, Christine Bochen in her fine review of the book questions whether the relationship was of greater importance to Lentfoehr than it was to Merton.<sup>13</sup> Even though the contact between Levertov and Merton was significantly less than it was with Lentfoehr, it was nonetheless significant in its own right. These two poets, Merton and Levertov, were engaged in the same endeavor, to reveal the spiritual dimensions of this life and express it in their poetry. You will find excellent reviews by Deborah Kehoe of both books in this volume of *The Merton Annual* that further clarify the importance of these relationships. It will suffice here simply to note Paul Pearson's comment in the Preface to the Lentfoehr book. After recalling publications that address Merton's friendships, Pearson rightly points out:

Clearly missing from this list though are Merton's friendships with women. Some attention has been given to some of those relationships from the sixties such as Mary Luke Tobin, Rosemary Radford Ruether and, of course, the nurse he fell in love with in 1966. But his lifelong friendships with women have been overlooked thus far, and I think in particular of his friendships with women such as Naomi Burton and the subject of this volume, Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr. (xv)

---

11. Robert Nugent, SDS, *Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: St Pauls, 2012).

12. Dana Greene, *Denise Levertov: A Poet's Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

13. See Christine Bochen, “A Mutually Enriching Relationship,” *The Merton Seasonal* 38.3 (Fall 2013) 26.

This oversight is significant. The omission of Merton's relationship with women leaves a gaping hole in our understanding of his life *and* work. Furthermore, it is an important issue to address because this hole echoes an attitude toward woman that prevailed in Merton's time. The monastic walls and signs forbidding women within the enclosure most certainly enforced the division. There is no reason to claim that Merton was a budding feminist. On the contrary, he was in many ways a "man" of his times. Those times, however, were marked by significant change. That change engaged and challenged Merton. So it is reasonable to suggest that something was unfolding in his life with regard to women that deserves attention.

Glenn Hinson's *A Miracle of Grace: An Autobiography*<sup>14</sup> is another welcome addition to the collection of books that recall friendships that were important to Merton during his lifetime. Like so many who take seriously the Christian life as a spiritual pilgrimage, Hinson found in Merton a mentor whose wisdom greatly influenced his life and work. The relation began with Hinson's trips to Gethsemani with his students from the Baptist seminary in Louisville. Conferences were held with Merton. While the division between Catholics and Protestants is less pronounced today, at that time it was quite significant. The commitment to ecumenical discussions and the courage of these two men to cross this line is much to be admired. Erlinda Paguio's fine review of *Miracle of Grace* in this volume of *The Merton Annual* underscores the importance of Hinson's life story for Merton studies.

John Wu, Jr.'s *You Know My Soul: Reflections on Merton's Prayers*<sup>15</sup> draws our attention to the way in which Merton's interest in and journey to the East forged a lasting friendship. The text witnesses to the uniting of East and West, with English and Chinese on facing pages. Merton's presence is there, as is that of the author, son of Merton's close friend and collaborator and himself a Merton visitor and correspondent as a young man, as he reveals in his introductory personal reminiscences here. Wu's reflections on sixteen prayers by Merton reveal an intimacy that transcends both time and space. That transcendence is important. The escape Merton engineered was from confinements that prevent humanity from discovering its essential oneness. This is what drew Wu to Merton. It is this transcendent oneness that he seeks to share with the reader. As one moves through the prayers, reflections and drawings, there is a sense of "emptiness and freedom" that

---

14. E. Glenn Hinson, *A Miracle of Grace: An Autobiography* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012).

15. John Wu, Jr., *You Know My Soul: Reflections on Merton's Prayers* (New Taipei City, Taiwan: Costantinian Press, 2012).

“lasts only for a short time, yet [is] enough for a lifetime” (207).

We conclude with two publications on the life and work of Leonard Cohen. This is the “friend” I mentioned that Merton never met. Donald Grayston’s review of *The Holy or the Broken* and *I’m Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen*<sup>16</sup> in this volume of *The Merton Annual* clarifies the relation between these two men. As Grayston points out, Cohen made a pilgrimage to Gethsemani and Merton’s grave. That is significant. More significant, however, is the similarity of their lives, spirits and messages. Both men climbed over the wall that separates the secular from the sacred. This is no small matter in a world where the meaning of life seems so elusive. It is only when the sacred and secular are reunited that the meaning will once again become apparent. Merton says as much in that delightfully funny poem about the five virgins who get into the wedding of the Lamb because they are good-looking and know how to dance. Had Merton known Cohen, I believe that he would have been included in the poem. Why not? A Jewish-Buddhist songwriter and performer from Canada fits quite well in Merton’s inclusive, eclectic world. Besides, Cohen’s “Our Lady of Solitude” is a beautiful song of devotion to Mary that everyone at the wedding, including Merton, would have greatly enjoyed.

All summer long she touched me  
 She gathered in my soul  
 From many a thorn, from many thickets  
 Her fingers, like a weaver’s  
 Quick and cool

And the light came from her body  
 And the night went through her grace  
 All summer long she touched me  
 And I knew her, I knew her  
 Face to face

And her dress was blue and silver  
 And her words were few and small  
 She is the vessel of the whole wide world  
 Mistress, oh mistress, of us all

Dear Lady; Queen of Solitude  
 I thank you with my heart  
 For keeping me so close to thee

---

16. Alan Light, *The Holy or the Broken: Leonard Cohen, Jeff Buckley and the Unlikely Ascent of “Hallelujah”* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012); Silvie Simmons, *I’m Your Man: The Life of Leonard Cohen* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

While so many, oh so many, stood apart  
And the light came from her body  
And the night went through her grace  
All summer long she touched me  
I knew her, I knew her  
Face to face<sup>17</sup>

### Freedom

As we have already noted, the freedom that Merton sought and found was inclusive of all aspects of society that limit humanity's capacity for freedom in which life might flourish. Two books here noted bring to our attention two areas of present concern.

***Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World***<sup>18</sup> is a significant contribution to Merton studies that offers an invaluable perspective on a pressing contemporary issue. Phillip Thompson, author of this excellent book, heads the introduction with a quotation from Merton that straightaway focuses the inquiry that follows:

There is no escaping technology. . . . It isn't just that we have got a lot of machines. But that the entire life of man is being totally revolutionized by technology. This has to be made very clear. We are not at all living just in an age where we have more tools, more complicated tools, and things are a little more efficient, that kind of thing. It's a totally new kind of society we're living in. (xiii)

That "new kind of society" raised concerns for Merton even as a monk and hermit with limited experience of technology. Nevertheless, he was quick to pick up on the implications. Simple shifts in language were alerts, warning of a new understanding of what it meant to be human, an understanding that had infiltrated the Church and his own monastic community. Merton took notice of Pope Paul VI's reference to contemplatives as "aviators of the spirit," thereby suggesting "an 'illusion' that contemplatives knew the mechanisms guiding the 'secrets of interior life' and could use them" (xvii).

What troubled Merton about this emerging shift in humankind's understanding of itself was the demeaning of humanity to a material existence in service to a totalitarian world. In this new era, an important

---

17. Leonard Cohen, *The Lyrics of Leonard Cohen* (London/New York: Ominibus Press, 2009) 103.

18. Phillip M. Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

question arises: will contemplatives be able to live in such a world? In order to fully appreciate the significance of this question, we must recognize that the existence of monks and monasteries is not the only concern, but also that deeper dimension of life which is essential to the freedom of the human spirit. In other words, our true self was once again at risk of being obscured. This time, however, technology not only threatens annihilation by nuclear holocaust but more subtly via the deluge of data from multiple forms of communication. Thompson addresses both of these challenges and a third, the manufacturing of transhumans.

Thompson skillfully weaves together texts from various sources to reveal Merton's vision of contemplative life in a technological world and then brings the wisdom inherent in that vision to the three challenges noted above. He does so recognizing what was "lacking then was the wisdom to know how to accept the undeniable utility of technology without violating the requirements for a fully human life, a life that praises God, aids other people, and nurtures creativity and freedom" (xvi). As one might expect, the search for a life that "nurtures creativity and freedom" eventually leads the reader to the woods, not a metaphorical woods, but a real forest where seekers have throughout history retreated, as did Merton, first to the abbey and later to the hermitage. Thompson rightfully concludes the book here, recognizing as he does that Merton was a "forest dweller" who understood that nature provides the grace necessary to restore human society when it becomes too walled off from life (81).

Once again we find a book on Merton's relationship with M. that fails to rise to the task.<sup>19</sup> *Thomas Merton—The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance*<sup>20</sup> fails but not for lack of trying. It is simply a daunting task. As the author himself points out: "For too long, Merton scholars have shied away from addressing Merton's love for M." (2-3). This shying away from the relationship has been for good reason. It was and remains a private matter and is simply none of our business. Furthermore, it may be impossible to chronicle a romance without sounding like a Hollywood movie or an enticing cover story for a tabloid. There is, however, another way of looking at this. A more productive approach would be to *not* focus on the relationship. If we focus our attention on Merton's inquiry into the disconnect between spirituality and sexuality in the modern world, I believe that we would come up with something

---

19. See Christine Bochen's review in this volume of *The Merton Annual*; Deborah Kehoe, "A Miscalculated Risk," *The Merton Seasonal* 32.2 (Summer 2013) 42-43; and Patrick F. O'Connell's review in *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (Advent 2013) 46-49.

20. Robert Waldron, *Thomas Merton—The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2012).

of importance. There are sufficient references to this issue throughout Merton's essays, correspondence, notes, journals and poetry to retrace the steps of his journey into one of the most perplexing problems of our day. But the task will require the knowledge and understanding of someone like Thomas Moore, whose book *The Soul of Sex: Cultivating Lives as an Act of Love*, digs deep into the nature of human sexuality to reveal the sacredness of Eros. The profaning of this sacredness is to be lamented. It has deprived us of one of the most precious graces afforded to us. Should we be surprised that even on this issue Merton has something to offer us? After years of reflecting on his experience of Eros, he shares with us the following spiritual direction:

The act of sexual love should by its very nature be joyous, unconstrained, alive, leisurely, inventive, and full of a special delight which the lovers have learned by experience to create for one another. There is no more beautiful gift of God than the little secret world of creative love and expression in which two persons who have totally surrendered to each other manifest and celebrate their mutual gift. *It is precisely in this spirit of celebration, gratitude, and joy that true purity is found.* The pure heart is not one that is terrified of eros but one that, with confidence and abandon of a child of God, accepts this gift as a sacred trust, for sex, too, is one of the talents which Christ has left us to trade with until He returns.<sup>21</sup>

Here is the place to begin an inquiry into Merton's contemplative vision of Eros for a world entrapped in a narrow and negative understanding of sexuality, an understanding that prevents discussions on gender, homosexuality and sexual abuse from opening onto new ways for humanity to reclaim this most "beautiful gift." Perhaps now is the time for a conference on Merton & Human Sexuality? If so, someone would contribute significantly to the discussion with a study of Czeslaw Milosz's poem entitled "In Krakow." Here, Merton's old friend, late in life, in his last collection of poems, included lines that witness to the beauty of Eros and inadvertently laments its loss:

The nakedness of a woman meets the nakedness of a man  
 And completes itself with its second half  
 Carnal, or even divine,  
 Which is likely the same thing,  
 As revealed to us in the Song of Songs.

---

21. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 117-18; subsequent references will be cited as "L&L" parenthetically in the text.

And must not every one of them nestle down into the Eternally  
 Living,  
 Into His scent of apples, saffron, cloves, and incense,  
 Into Him who is and is coming  
 With the brightness of glowing wax candles?  
 And He, divisible, separate for each of them,  
 Receives them, him and her, in a wafer, into their own flame.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

We conclude with one last book. While *Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton*<sup>23</sup> edited by Fiona Gardner could be simply understood as another compilation of texts, lifted out of context, and set aside as less worthy of attention, I found something more than a “fabricated book.”<sup>24</sup> Here is another example of collaboration. As noted earlier with regard to the two books on meditation edited by Pearson and Thurston, I am of the opinion that it is time to view these works in a new light. I sense from his review of *Precious Thoughts* in this volume of *The Merton Annual* that Jonathan Montaldo would agree. Since Montaldo has provided an excellent review of the book, I will focus on the way this book extends Merton’s gift of friendship and pastoral care to those seeking freedom to grow in the grace of God.

It is important to note that Gardner is a psychotherapist and spiritual director. Her skillful selection of excerpts from Merton’s letters was influenced by the expertise that she brought to the task. As a person committed to a caring profession, she approached the letters with a concern for a world perplexed about the purpose of life and thus in “search . . . for inspiration, nuggets of hope, fragments of faith” (10). Knowing that Merton understood the alienation and fragmentation of the modern world, she sorted out excerpts into daily readings believing “one at a time, day by day, over a year” (12) readers are gradually directed in their journey to God.

As a book intended for formation and freedom it fulfills the intentions expressed by Merton in an essay posthumously published:

The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary

22. Czeslaw Milosz, *Second Space* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) 6.

23. *Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton* selected and edited by Fiona Gardner (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2011).

24. See Jonathan Montaldo’s review of *Precious Thoughts* in this volume of *The Merton Annual* where he mentions Robert Giroux’s thoughts on books “fabricated” from Merton texts.

definition of the individual himself. The world is made up of the people who are fully alive in it: that is, of the people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it. The world, is therefore, more real in proportion as the people in it are able to be more fully and more humanly alive: that is to say, better able to make a lucid and conscious use of their freedom. Basically, this freedom must consist first of all in the capacity to choose their own lives, to find themselves on the deepest possible level. (*L&L* 3)

Gardner selected the title for the book from a letter by Boris Pasternak to John Harris in which Pasternak expresses his appreciation for Merton's "precious thoughts and dear bottomless letters" which had enriched his life (9). So the title invokes memories of another time and place in which the human spirit was imprisoned. And, now, Merton's letters come to us with the same intent: to assist us in times like these, when escape is the only way to stay alive and keep dreaming.