

attempts to define the Benedictine charism need to consider the life of St. Benedict and not just his *Rule*. When one considers that Benedict's life, as St. Gregory tells it in his *Dialogues*, is a series of encounters with guests, and that Benedict engaged in apostolic preaching and even sent monks out to preach, one may reach a different conclusion than Merton and the early Cistercians did about the place of hospitality and apostolic works in Benedictine life. Michael Casey, himself a Trappist, has argued that it is best to see Benedictine life as lying between two poles represented by the two monastic fathers Benedict used as sources and recommends for further study at the end of his *Rule*. On the one hand, there is John Cassian, who represents asceticism, solitude and contemplation. On the other hand, there is St. Basil, who represents hospitality, the apostolate and engagement with the wider Church and world. Monasteries and monasticisms will fall somewhere on this spectrum between contemplative cloister and apostolic engagement. A wide range of emphases can still be considered authentic expressions of the Benedictine charism. The young Merton, committed as he was to the Cistercian ideal, does not have a broad enough perspective in this regard. At times, he comes off condemnatory against variations. In the most extreme instance, he opines that while the Cluniacs may have been good Christians, they could hardly be considered Benedictines (see April 29).

Despite this small reservation, this book is recommended as a valuable contribution to the history of spirituality and as a clear and unapologetic presentation of the Cistercian ideal. *In the Valley of Wormwood* is a rewarding read for those who seek greater familiarity with the beginnings of Cistercian life and of Merton himself.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Selected Essays*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), pp. xviii + 493. ISBN 978-1-62698-023-5 (cloth) \$50.00; 978-1-62698-092-1 (paper) \$38.00.

For the first time this year I assigned students in my freshmen theology class to read Merton's "Rain and the Rhinoceros," widely regarded as one of his most beautifully realized essays, and included among thirty-three essays in this superb new volume. One of my students – like nearly all, she was brand new to Merton – wrote in her journal as follows:

Over the course of ten pages Thomas Merton made me the most confused college student in the world. By the time I finished reading those same ten pages the second time, Thomas Merton made me

feel like one of the most enlightened people on the planet. The way Merton writes reminds me of the way waves crash on the shore of a beach. He makes a statement that hits you and then slowly seduces you into believing whatever he wants you to believe.

How does Merton do it? How does he get away with it? And what are the prospects that Merton's writings will kindle a sacred fire in the next generation? As a lifelong Catholic, as a classroom teacher and theologian, and as the parent of four children, these are the questions that arose in me as I read and re-read the essays in this marvelous collection, some for the first time. Before pondering these questions, let me offer some general comments about the aims, structure and unique contribution of Merton's *Selected Essays*.

As editor Patrick O'Connell explains in the introduction, the impetus for the book was straightforward: to provide in one volume a window into "the breadth and depth of Merton's work as an essayist" (xviii). But how does one choose from among some 250 essays in the Merton corpus? Among the criteria for inclusion, O'Connell highlights an ambitious if not daunting agenda:

the desire to include representative essays across the whole spectrum of Merton's interests, concerns, and enthusiasms: solitude and the contemplative life as intrinsic dimensions of contemporary existence; the interaction of Christianity with culture, both historically and currently; monastic history and monastic renewal; key social issues, especially war and peace and racial justice, as well as concern for the environment; the spiritual implications of literature, particularly the work of three modern authors with whom Merton resonated most deeply – Pasternak, Faulkner, and Camus; reflections on his own aesthetic theory and practice; dialogue with other religious traditions; the centrality of the Christian mystery to authentic human identity. (xvi)

By all of these measures the book succeeds wildly. Beginning with a little-known but shimmering autobiographical essay of 1950, "The White Pebble," and proceeding chronologically to 1968 by order of composition – a chronology of all Merton's essays are detailed in an Appendix – the essays range widely in substance, voice and tone. All are superbly chosen, though I share O'Connell's regret for the inevitable exclusions (the incomparable "Herakleitos the Obscure," especially).

Beyond the substance of the essays themselves, no less a marvel to me are O'Connell's masterful headnotes: compact, sensitive and precise, often as cogent as the work they introduce. How he is able to convey in

so few lines, for example, the brilliance and enduring significance of an essay like “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude” is beyond me. The answer, of course, lies hidden somewhere in O’Connell’s own discipline of solitude and painstaking attention to the intricacies of language in Merton’s writings, played out across decades of committed scholarship. The results are wonderful. Thinking and praying with this book over the course of many months, I feel I’ve been wholly reintroduced to Merton, and not only Merton, but through him, the breathtaking human drama that marks the twentieth century’s convergence of violence and near-despair with tremendous beauty and the quest for meaning and hope. The book marks a new gold standard for readers prepared to plumb Merton’s witness to the life of spirit and Christian hope for our times. The paperback edition happily brings the price into range for scholars, non-specialists and students alike.

How, then, does Merton do it? What makes him such an effective essayist? Merton himself gives us a clue in a seminal essay of 1959, when he observes of the Russian writer Boris Pasternak: “He is a poet and a musician . . . and the structure of [his novel *Dr. Zhivago*] is symphonic, thematic, almost liturgical” (43). Much like Pasternak, Merton “seduces you” (to borrow my student’s words) not in the first place by leveling an argument, a chain of ideas, but rather by enclosing you in *an atmosphere*, a climate of wakefulness, abiding presence and finally, the divine mercy. Merton puts you there with him, attuning all the senses to the present moment, and in the present, the lively presence of God. “Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody” (217). In Merton’s hands the rain falling through the forest canopy makes a peaceful noise, unselfconsciously soaking the earth in eddies of protest against “the technological Platos who think they now run the world” (175). Like waves, indeed, crashing on the shores of our consciousness, Merton writes by “rhythms that are not those of the engineer” (217), primordial rhythms we recognize but have mostly forgotten. The fish needs constant reminding: *This is water. This is water.*

But there are razor-sharp arguments, too, in these essays, and Merton does not spare his reader’s consciences, least of all those of the intellectual and “professional” religious classes, where I dwell. It is not hard to recognize in myself and among my peers in the academy and church a “conspiracy of silence” that does “not protest against organized murder” (373) but secretly approves of it. Drone attacks in the Middle East, anyone? Racial profiling, suppression of the vote, and mass incarceration of peoples of color? Beheadings by the “Islamic State” gone gruesomely viral, drawing the US predictably into a sectarian civil war in Syria and

back again into Iraq and Afghanistan, with no end in sight? In a hauntingly prescient meditation called “Terror and the Absurd,” Merton joins Camus in rebelling against “a world in which one must choose between being a victim or an executioner” (372). Yet how many of us are “paid to keep quiet or to say things that do not disturb.” How many “are nourished in order that we may continue to sleep.”¹

At times Merton’s arguments sting with parody and dry wit that delights. Recounting his defense of Gandhi as a young student at Oakham, for example, he deconstructs the conventional wisdom of his classmates and British contemporaries who took for granted the “sweeping assumption that the people of India were political and moral infants, incapable of taking care of themselves . . . who could not survive without the English to do their thinking and planning for them. The British Raj was, in fact, a purely benevolent, civilizing enterprise for which the Indians were not suitably grateful.” And besides, “How could Gandhi be right when he was *odd*?” Pause; full paragraph break, and then: “Infuriated at the complacent idiocy of this argument, I tried to sleep and failed” (178).

How does Merton get away with it? That is to say, how does he continue to captivate readers even while ensnaring them in a devastating social critique? Another of my wise young students writes in her journal not of being “seduced” by Merton or “crashed into” like waves but rather of being made to “stop and look inside myself.” Merton, she writes, “got his point across in a way that is not authoritative, but reflective. He did not tell me what to think, but made me come to the conclusions on my own.” Here may be the secret to Merton’s style as an essayist: his refusal to speak as “one with authority,” standing above the fray, having it all figured out. Put another way, he does not accuse his reader before he has already indicted himself as a guilty bystander. Refusing more and more to offer “ready-to-serve Catholic answers” (ix), Merton asks questions that make me “look inside myself” and seek after truth from vantage points I otherwise might never have considered. In this sense he is the consummate wisdom teacher, trusting that the deepest truth about things already sleeps within us, and will reverberate palpably when it is spoken.

“[The] basic choice remains this: *the refusal to be a murderer or the accomplice of murderers*” (381) – and, by the way, where will you stand? The question is put before us, and yet, in the spirit of Pasternak, Merton beckons us finally not to stand fixed anywhere but rather *to move* with “the freedom of the sons of God” (51) in vigilant defense of life and of love, the deepest law of our being. “[W]e need a reasoning that is in-

1. Thomas Merton, “Letter to an Innocent Bystander,” *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 60.

formed with compassion" (142), and here it is not the "magic" of beautiful wordplay (174-75) or a domineering intellect that leads the way; it is the authority of deep human experience and a mind and heart transformed by love. Thus, in the way of Gandhi, Merton's protest throughout these pages is not a frontal attack against the organized murderers so much as the thought-systems that justify organized murder; it is a refusal of every ideology or structure – including religious ones – that reduces *persons* into winners and losers, saved and damned, murderers and victims, all aberrations of the divine image. Indeed the seeds for Merton's "disgust" with the "interests of those in power" – whether capitalist, communist or religious – were planted very early, as he notes of his early flirtations with communism in "The White Pebble": "I did not take well to the incantation of slogans as a substitute for thought" (8).

Anticipating our postmodern and "post-Christian" sense of fragmentation, so much of Merton's concern in these essays is epistemological. "Our very existence," he suggests provocatively, "is 'speech' interpreting reality" (182). But what is reality? How to discern what is real and true in the face of "the bewildering complexity of the almost infinite contradictory propositions and claims to meaning" (182)? Binding all of these essays, as O'Connell observes, is "what Merton called a sapiential, or sophianic, perspective – an intuitive, participatory awareness of the 'hidden wholeness' of all reality" (xvii). It is a wisdom "based on experience more than on logic" (183). Above all it is a wisdom based on Love: God's own "speech" making reality. Thus epistemology for the Catholic sacramental imagination merges fluidly into ontology. What finally unites these essays for me – epistemologically, mystically, theologically – is the memory and experience of Christ, "our fellow-pilgrim and brother" (204) who both reveals and "makes real" in us by his Incarnation the hidden ground of Love, our "deepest . . . most fontal reality" (183). Even an essay on nuclear war brims with symphonic gestures to the presence of Christ alive in the world, the divine potentiality for Love that hides in every person, in blood and flesh, never as abstract principle (see 142).

In the pattern of God's self-emptying and complete identification with the poverty of the human condition, from the Nativity to the Cross, the Christian must revolt "at every form of power that relies on blood" (373). Tragically, this paradoxical truth, this *person* and way of being at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount and unveiled bodily in the paschal mystery, was grasped by Gandhi far more than it has been understood, much less lived, by many Christians. "'Jesus died in vain,' said Gandhi, 'if he did not teach us to regulate the whole of life by the eternal law of love.' Strange that he should use this expression," says Merton. "It seems to

imply at once concern and accusation” (183). Likewise, the juxtaposition of priestly concern for his flesh-and-blood contemporaries and prophetic accusation against systems that dehumanize us all is the spark that fires so many of Merton’s forays as an essayist. What breaks through the fire is a message as direct as it is difficult: “The task of the Christian is to make the thought of peace once again seriously possible” (129).

Patrick O’Connell concludes his introduction by confessing his poignant hope that many years from now his grandchildren “may experience something of the same enjoyment, fascination, and intellectual and spiritual nourishment in these essays that their grandfather has found over the past four decades since he first encountered Thomas Merton” (xviii). Every reader who shares in that hope, as I do, owes a debt of thanks to O’Connell and Orbis Books for this stellar volume. If my students are any indication, once bitten by Merton, the next generation will keep coming back, even if they have difficulty naming precisely why. Perhaps what keeps me coming back is the way Merton gently draws my gaze back to Christ, and through him, beyond all human speech and all structures toward “that silence in which alone Being speaks to us in all its simplicity” (183). To first behold and then to grow in friendship with Christ is to ignite the “spark” which is my true self and at once “the flash of the Absolute recognizing itself in me” (438).

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MERTON, Thomas, *Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry* (Introduction by Michael W. Higgins + 16 Lectures: 7 CDs); *“God Speaks to Each of Us”: The Poetry and Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* (Introduction by Michael W. Higgins + 11 Lectures: 5 CDs); *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classical Literature* (Introduction by Michael W. Higgins + 10 Lectures: 5 CDs); *“All the Living and the Dead”:* *The Literature of James Joyce* (Introduction by Michael W. Higgins + 4 Lectures: 3 CDs); *Prayer and Growth in Christian Life* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 13 Segments: 6 CDs); *“Man to Man”:* *A Message of Contemplatives to the World (1967)* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 10 Segments: 3 CDs); *Living Contemplatively: Address to the Carmelite Sisters of Savannah (1967)* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 8 Segments: 4 CDs); *The Search for Wholeness* (3 Lectures: 2 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).

Of the eight sets of recordings issued in 2013 by Now You Know Media in their continuing project of making Thomas Merton’s conferences and other oral materials available commercially, four are focused on literary