

Introduction: The Dead Say Only One Word

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This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

Walter Benjamin¹

Take me out to Cypress Hill . . . And we'll hear the dead people talk. They do talk there. They chatter together like birds on Cypress Hill, but all they say is one word and that one word is "live."

Tennessee Williams²

Looking Back

With thanks to poet Carolyn Forché who, by way of her magnificent poem *The Angel of History*,³ led me to explore the life and works of philosopher Walter Benjamin, I share his words at the outset of this new volume of *The Merton Annual* commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. Inspired by Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin poetically depicts the movement of history not as a linear series of distinct events, but as a fierce storm inundating the path of time with an uninterrupted flow of disasters, its propulsion forceful enough to render a heavenly being unable to resist the momentum, despite his longing to fulfill his office as a guardian of creation.

The image of the past as relentless energy that can thrust unwilling angels into the future strikes me as an intriguing point of entry into a collection of essays dedicated to an occasion for looking back. While Benjamin's extravagant imagery suggests the potential risks of retrospec-

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" IX (available at: <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>).

2. Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus Descending*, in Tennessee Williams, *Four Plays* (New York: Signet Classics, 1976) 40; subsequent references will be cited as "Williams" parenthetically in the text.

3. Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994).

tion, more importantly, it implies that despite the number of years since Merton's passing, many of today's troubling realities are bewilderingly similar to those of 1968 and emphasizes the truth that the anguish that marked that "beast of a year"⁴ did not begin or end with the changing of the calendar. Rather, as Walter Benjamin, a victim of Nazism, Carolyn Forché, a poet-chronicler of Central American political corruption, and Thomas Merton, a contemplative witness to violence and oppression, all understood, brutality and suffering have deep roots in human history.

Yet, as Merton, even in his most wittily contemptuous portrayals of cultural absurdities, reminds us, we are not alone in this human condition: "Slowly slowly / Comes Christ through the ruins / . . . The Lord of History / Weeps into the fire."⁵ The Savior of the world shares human grief with tears that extinguish the flames of our tribulations, perhaps chief among them the sorrow of death. But death, as Merton asserts in *Love and Living*, is not simply the inevitable termination of created life but "part of a living continuity."⁶ If viewed in the light of Christian "love and grace" (L&L101), death is understood as "the point at which life can attain its pure fulfillment" (L&L105).

Carol Cutrere, the product of Tennessee Williams' fertile imagination as a character in his 1957 play *Orpheus Descending*, is a woman labeled by plantation society "a Christ-bitten reformer" who donned a burlap sack and vowed to walk barefoot to the state capitol in order to call attention to the economic and racial injustice suffered by the Mississippi Delta's black citizens – including a public hanging, based on an actual event. After sharing the details of her protest's humiliating defeat, she asks to be taken to the cemetery so she can listen to the dead repeat their "only advice," the solitary word "live" (Williams 40).

To my ear, that graveyard litany expands in significance when considered alongside Merton's discourse in *Love and Living* on the single word "death" (L&L 97-105). As he did so energetically in life, Merton, among the departed souls for fifty years now, continues to counsel the living to live – not because we fear death, but because we take death seriously enough to recognize it as the final laying down of a gift not meant to be

4. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 78; subsequent references will be cited as "OSM" parenthetically in the text.

5. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 55; *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 449 (subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text).

6. Thomas Merton, "Seven Words," in Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 97; subsequent references will be cited as "L&L" parenthetically in the text.

hoarded or squandered, but lovingly shared with our fellow pilgrims on this journey. The articles comprising this volume of *The Merton Annual* offer diverse approaches to situating and observing Merton in the last year of his life. Nevertheless, within these vigorous discussions of texts, contexts and subtexts, the attentive reader can discern a unifying theme: Merton's enduring faith, amid the continuous wreckage of history, in the hidden unity and indomitable love of God.

Voices from the Past

In keeping with tradition, Volume 31 opens with **Thomas Merton** in his own words: "Two Conferences on Prayer: India 1968" provides transcriptions of two talks he gave during that fateful visit to Asia. First, "A Conference on Prayer," presented to the Conference of Religious of India on the Feast of Christ the King, October 27, 1968, notably focuses at the outset on the "ferment" and "tensions" besetting the Church regarding the specter of Communism in the U.S. during the Cold War years. Merton goes on to stress the essential role of prayer in the life of believers, emphasizing that Christ the King is enthroned in the hearts of His followers and cannot be removed by even the most intimidating of temporal threats. "Nothing can take [faith] away," he repeats.

Following "A Conference on Prayer" is the address entitled "Toward a Theology of Prayer," which Merton gave to Jesuit scholastics at St. Mary's College in Darjeeling, India, on November 25, 1968. Again referencing the era in which he is speaking, the late 1960s, he describes the Church in the West (six years into the reforms ushered in by Vatican II) as desperately in need of the kind of spiritual renewal that the Church in Asia could provide. Basically, he calls for a theology of prayer that contemplates rather than explains away life's struggles, prayer that focuses on the contradiction of the heart's yearning for a Savior who is already present, but ignored.

The homily delivered by **Daniel Walsh** at Merton's funeral mass on December 17, 1968, provides a third historical document to lead off this commemorative volume. More eulogy than homily, Walsh's discourse notes that Merton was mindful of the possibility that he would not return from his Asian sojourn; Walsh joins Abbot Flavian Burns in recognizing that Merton was "ready" for death and "even saw a certain fittingness in dying over there amidst those Asian monks who symbolized for him man's ancient and perennial desire for the deep things of God." Walsh sums up Father Louis as a man of faith and prayer who was well acquainted with the darkness in his own life and that of the world he occupied but nevertheless embodied the attitude "that a thousand difficulties do not

make a single doubt.”

A Fitting Complement

A felicitous contribution to this volume of the *Annual* is the transcript of the homily delivered by **Daniel P. Horan** at the Fiftieth Anniversary Memorial Mass at Corpus Christi Church in New York City on December 10, 2018. Titled “Seeds of Inspiration: The Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton (1915–1968),” Horan’s words serve as a powerful complement to the text of Daniel Walsh’s homily presented at Merton’s funeral Mass fifty years earlier. Enhancing Walsh’s reminders of Merton’s exemplary, unassailable faith in the redemptive grace of God, Horan points to the famous monk’s “unabashed humanity,” his willingness to share his “broken and saved, holy and sinful” existence as his gift to the world in which he lived. Fifty years later, as Horan’s homily conveys, that voice still rings with authenticity, offering a living message of unity and hope to a new generation of searchers and pilgrims.

A Chorus of Prophets

In his 2016 publication *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggles for Social and Political Justice*,⁷ Albert Raboteau closely examines selected texts by Merton (with considerable attention to “Letters to a White Liberal”⁸) and places him in a group of extraordinary people of faith devoted to resisting the unholy trinity of racism, militarism and materialism, three forms of oppression denounced by activists in the mid-to-late 1960s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and the escalation of the Vietnam War. The seven people Raboteau discusses, however, went beyond condemning the unreasonable or unconstitutional nature of those three forms of human enslavement; they aligned their message with Old Testament prophecy and the teachings of Christ so that others might be liberated and inspired to embolden their resistance with biblical values. Raboteau writes:

They kept hope alive by troubling the consciences of their fellow citizens, shaming them out of the slumber of contentment and apathy of ease to act as if the proclamations of the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the Parables, and Matthew 25 constituted a

7. Albert Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggles for Social and Political Justice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); subsequent references will be cited as “Raboteau” parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.

charter for a society, consonant with the nation's founding principles of civil equality, justice, and liberty for all. (Raboteau 199)

Calling to mind Raboteau's words is this volume's article by **Thomas Malewitz**, "From the Mountain to the Cross: Revisiting 1968 through the Prophetic Words of King, Kennedy, Chavez and Merton." Malewitz uses excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount as a striking organizational strategy; and in an efficient narrative style, he highlights key events in 1968 that illustrate a spiritual link between Merton and other prominent prophetic figures of the times who engaged in Gospel-centered advocacy for society's downtrodden and exploited members.

One of the key members of that group of religious radicals celebrated by both Raboteau and Malewitz is Martin Luther King, Jr., whose determination to follow God's will wherever it called him resulted in martyrdom by gunshot on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. In his concise essay, "Crisis of Faith: Thomas Merton and the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr.," **William Apel**, whose name is familiar to regular readers of Merton studies, particularly for his work with Merton's letters,⁹ applies his familiarity with Merton's personal writings to make a case that King's assassination momentarily unsettled Merton's rock-solid belief in the validity of the "Christian message of love." By quoting from letters exchanged between Merton and John and June Yungblut – activists in the Civil Rights Movement and personal friends of the King family – as evidence that Merton, possibly on the brink of a "faith crisis," nevertheless gave himself over to acts of love in the days following King's death, Apel concludes that the brief episode of stark questioning ultimately led to a reaffirmation of "a theology of love" shared by Merton and King. Although their scheduled first face-to-face meeting was forever deferred by a hate crime, their identities are now linked as two prophets taken from this world in 1968, who, fifty years later, amid the still-raging storms of bigotry, greed and violence, continue to make their call for living a life of love.

Expansion and Resistance

"The most disturbing thing about it is something hard to formulate: but it seems to be another step toward degradation and totalism on part of the whole country. . . . The situation seems to me very grave" (*OSM* 127), Merton writes in his journal entry of June 6, 1968, referring to the murder of Robert Kennedy and its distressing illumination of the times. The somber observation appears amid expressions of contentment that Merton

9. See William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

felt in his recent visits to the American West, trips he was allowed to take under the more permissive leadership of the newly elected Abbot Flavian Burns. “Perhaps I need to go much further,” he muses (*OSM* 127). As is widely known, plans were already underway for this expansive movement, launching Merton on what would turn out to be his last earthly journey, travel that would intensify his insights into the common nature of human degradation as well as deepen his sensitivity to life’s essential purity.

In her article “Kanchenjunga – ‘Yin-yang Palace of Opposites in Unity’: Reflections on Thomas Merton’s Experiences on the Mim Tea Estate Retreat,” **Fiona Gardner** writes expertly of the psychological, philosophical and theological phenomenon known as “the coincidence of opposites,” a concept with which Merton was intellectually familiar by way of his vast reading but which he came to know experientially when he was in India. Gardner focuses on Merton’s meditations on the mountain Kanchenjunga, as noted in his journal accounts of his Asian pilgrimage, reflections that rise to a celebration of unity conveyed in rhapsodic phrasing: “O Tantric Mother Mountain!” (*OSM* 286). Gardner concludes her analysis by pointing out that Merton not only underwent this powerful experience, but with his linguistic gifts, he articulates it lucidly enough to recreate the experience for the reader, making it possible perhaps for others, through his writing, to share in the transcendence and to find inner peace in a world of conflicts.

Offering a broader interpretation of the widening range of Merton’s final travels, two articles in this volume engage in stimulating analyses of *The Geography of Lograire*,¹⁰ Merton’s 1968 unfinished poem sequence of over 100 pages in which he delves into the dimensions of myth, dream and memory and evokes the mostly terrifying events of an imaginary odyssey through human history. Interpreting this complex poem as a record of Merton’s interior journeying in his last year of life is geography professor and poet **Kathleen M. Baker**’s “Disrupting Disparities in a Mythic Place: Internal Engagement in the Country of Lograire.” Baker reads *Lograire* as, in part, a culminating result of the monk’s frustrated intentions to publicly criticize the times’ normalization of violence, citing as an example the prohibition in 1962 on the part of his monastic superiors to publish his repudiation of militarism in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.¹¹ Baker, in effect, equates *Lograire* with Merton’s conscientious objection to global and timeless injustice. Furthermore, by using the clever metaphor, “guy

10. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); CP 495-609.

11. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

wires,” Baker suggests that the prodigious labor of creativity that went into making *Lograire* gave Merton an inner stability for his harrowing of life’s turbulence (and presumably a similar benefit is possible for the reader willing to meet the poem’s demands).

In “Dismantling the Rule of the Father: Towards the Kingdom of the Im/Possible in *The Geography of Lograire*,” **Malgorzata Poks** adds another item to her impressive scholarly expositions of this formidable work.¹² With surgical focus, Poks cites passages in which *Lograire* exposes the patriarchal forces behind the poem’s extensive catalogue of brutal events (actual and imagined) within the four points of the compass. Simultaneously, Poks builds a compelling argument for the poem’s understated affirmation of the potential within the human condition to change the world’s dominant narrative. She concludes: “What we have in *Lograire* is a plea for theopoetics, for learning to see the world as God does: attentively and lovingly.”

Enhancing the discourse on Merton’s poetic response to the abuses of power is “The Familiar Perspectives of American History: Thomas Merton on Black and Indigenous Oppression in the United States,” in which **David Golemboski** brings his considerable knowledge of governmental theory and policy to a study of two texts by Merton: *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans*¹³ and *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*.¹⁴ As a logical coherence strategy, Golemboski divides his treatment into sections focusing on each of “three modes of racial control that white people have leveraged against people of color throughout the American story.” Golemboski cogently demonstrates Merton’s grasp of the country’s “profound heritage of guilt” and suggests that the disturbing frequency with which overt racism is making the national news today calls for brave reflection on this shameful ancestry. Perhaps more contemplative consideration of the country’s catastrophic racial history could revolutionize the American identity for a future free from the taint of oppression.

12. See Malgorzata Poks, “*The Geography of Lograire* as Merton’s *Gestus* – Prologomena,” *The Merton Annual* 22 (2009) 150-69; Malgorzata Poks, “With Malinowski in the Postmodern Desert: Merton, Anthropology and the Ethnopoetics of *The Geography of Lograire*,” *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 49-73.

13. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976).

14. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

Singular Considerations

Marcela Raggio's "Thomas Merton's Nostalgia," a study of the universal human experience of longing for "home" – in all its myriad associations – seems a fitting centerpiece for a volume that looks at the subject of Merton in relation to the long-ago, the far-away and the ever-present. Raggio draws from preeminent authorities to categorize the varieties of nostalgia and to classify Merton within that taxonomy. Unsurprisingly, Raggio displays Merton, a lifelong "wanderer," as exhibiting at various points in his life, all forms of the mysterious psychological phenomenon. Raggio demonstrates originality by illustrating her observations about Merton's expressions of nostalgia with selections from his 1963 *Emblems of a Season of Fury*,¹⁵ a collection of poems notable for their impassioned voice of social consciousness, as well as passages from *The Geography of Lograire*, that all-encompassing depiction of the human journey's many occasions of displacement and homesickness.

Chad Thralls, in "From 'Get out of My Way' to 'Shining like the Sun': Thomas Merton on Cities, Community and Solitude," finds a fresh context for the well-rehearsed story of Merton's famous epiphany on the sidewalks of downtown Louisville, that watershed moment in his evolving attitude toward being in the world. Citing Philip Sheldrake's writings on urban spirituality as well as the author's own stories as a resident of New York City, Thralls makes a case for the contemporary applicability of Merton's writings on the apparent tensions between solitude and community and the challenges of seeking spiritual nurturing in a society where increasing numbers of people live in heavily populated locales and in an atmosphere in which political divisiveness tragically obstructs opportunities for enriching communal interaction.

"Writing in the Shadow of the Apocalyptic Cherub: Autobiographical Forms in *Day of a Stranger*" by **Zachary Garrett** is similar to Thralls' piece in that it also underscores Merton's openness to the spirit of his times as well as his natural tendency to transform accordingly his relationships with others and with himself. Garrett, a scholar of composition and rhetoric, finds more than literary significance in the stylistic differences between *The Seven Storey Mountain*,¹⁶ Merton's famous 1948 life story, and the autobiographical essay written two decades later.¹⁷ Garrett uses the categories of autobiographical forms established by William Spenge-

15. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963); CP 303-91.

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

17. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981).

mann to demonstrate how changes in Merton's "rhetorical situation," i.e. his perceptions of subject matter, purpose and audience, influenced by the trajectory of history in the Church and in society, in turn affected Merton's approach to sharing himself with the world through the written word. Essentially, Garrett seems to be linking the evolution of Merton's autobiographical style with his widening embrace of the unity of existence.

Wrapping up this array of articles is the transcript (lightly edited for publication) of "Harpo and the Clown of God," the 2017 ITMS General Meeting plenary presentation by **Michael N. McGregor**, author of *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax*.¹⁸ With the fluency of a meticulous researcher and dedicated biographer, McGregor traces the arc of the Merton-Lax friendship from its inception to its earthly ending by relating seven episodes illustrating the qualities of lasting relationships, one of which is a sense of humor. The bond of healing laughter is central to McGregor's account, made evident by references to the Marx Brothers in the cryptic correspondence between Merton and Lax, as well as in expressions of McGregor's own longtime attraction to their inimitable brand of comedy. In a concluding scenario of his imagining, McGregor beautifully evokes the enduring amiability of these two men. One can almost hear them "chatter together like birds on Cypress Hill."

Merton Scholarship of 2017

The recently released film *First Reformed*¹⁹ contains a scene in which the main character, Ernst Toller, a lonely clergyman in charge of a small historic church, suffering despair wrought by a conflicted conscience, receives counseling from Rev. Jeffers, the well-meaning pastor of the thriving "Abundant Life" mega-church. Jeffers, losing patience with Toller's anguish, tells him to stop living so idealistically – and to stop reading Thomas Merton because "he didn't live in the real world either." Toller's response of fractured utterances does more than a flow of words (possibly piquant quotes from Merton) could, under the circumstances, to emphasize the distance between these two holy men's different definitions of "living in the real world."

I was reminded of this scene when I was reading the concluding feature article in Volume 31, **Joseph Q. Raab's** "A Prophet Is Never Passé," the customary annotated survey of the year's yield of Merton-related publications. In recognition of this issue's commemorative occasion, Raab enhances his bibliographic overview by framing his discussion of 2017

18. Michael N. McGregor, *Pure Act: The Uncommon Life of Robert Lax* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

19. *First Reformed*, written and directed by Paul Schrader, distributed by A24 (2018).

articles and books on Merton in relation to topics ranging from Christian mysticism to Central American poets, with opinions regarding Merton's rightful place in history. Raab bookends his review with a mention of Pope Francis's 2015 recognition of Merton before the U.S. Congress²⁰ at the front and of CNN "Prime Time" host Chris Cuomo's recent reading from *Disputed Questions*²¹ at the end, while the USCCB's exclusion of Merton from the 2004 *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* – claiming that he was no longer relevant – languishes in the middle.

Disputed definitions of what it means to live abundantly, while certainly not unique to our times, seem to be raging with white-heat intensity in our society today where the voices of militarism, materialism and racism deliver their messages of false values and empty promises without nuance, qualification, apology or censure. As we now witness with withering frequency, when these voices resound in the void of the darkest recesses of the human soul, they can wreak devastation and death. Our society aches for the counter-messages of prophets. Therefore, on this occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's departing this world, let us continue to celebrate the fact that, as Raab reminds us, Merton "remains in contemporary consciousness at the cutting edge of some important issues both within and beyond the Church." Let us revel in the continuing inspiration Merton gives to writers such as those whose work appears in this journal and elsewhere in academic or scholarly publishing. But let us also persist in encouraging a wider audience for his life-affirming voice. Perhaps now more than ever, we need the words of this prophet to be written on subway walls, spoken from movie screens, and read on 24-hour-news-network teleprompters.

20. See Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 16-23.

21. See Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 133-34.