

Introduction: A Society of “Soul Friends”

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During the 2021 General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, the biennial “Louie” award for an outstanding published work on Merton was given to Sophronia Scott in recognition of her book *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*.¹ In a chapter in that book on friendship, Scott quotes an Emily Dickinson poem: “The soul selects her own society.”² She invokes this line to reflect on the way that friendships often develop among unexpected people, and suggests that Merton’s eclectic and wide-ranging friendships (what he referred to as his “apostolate of friendship”³) was less the result of deliberation and planning than of openness and destiny: “When I think of how Merton connected with his soul friends, the key seemed to be showing up somewhere and being totally, unreservedly himself, like laying all of his cards on the table. . . . And because Merton’s soul was so completely on display, it was available to attract, like a magnet, the society that would most strengthen it” (84).

Of course, the circle of living people who were friends of Merton during his lifetime continues to shrink. In this volume of *The Merton Annual*, we share a collection of letters written to Merton by his friend Jim Forest, who transitioned to new life in January 2022. Yet even those of us who did not know Merton but remain drawn to him through his writing, art and legacy can appreciate the sense of “attraction” that Scott describes. The richness of Merton’s work, the depth of his spirituality and the sincerity of his journey through life have attracted to Merton a diverse society of souls. While the aspects of Merton’s self that attract you to him may not be the same as those aspects that attract me, you and I share in the common experience of relationship to this distinctive person – and therefore share in a kind of relationship with one another.

The eclecticism of the community of Merton scholars and enthusiasts

1. Sophronia Scott, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

2. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 189.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 482 [November 10, 1958 letter to Pope John XXIII]; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.

is on rich display in this volume of *The Merton Annual*. These pages contain a variety of works of original scholarship ranging from close reading of Merton's poetry to historical study of his writing on nuclear war to consideration of his relevance to contemporary pastoral practice. They include letters, an interview and an open letter written in the spirit of Merton's prophetic voice. Each of these illuminates some particular aspect of Merton's life, work or legacy, and enhances our collective understanding of Merton. What's more, they each represent a unique point of connection to Merton, and a contribution to the ongoing, unfolding life of this community.

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As mentioned above, this volume opens with a lengthy collection of letters – most previously unpublished – written to Thomas Merton by **Jim Forest**, with an introduction and extensive annotation by **Patrick F. O'Connell**. Forest was a lifelong peace activist, co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship and leader in the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Over the course of the 1960s, he and Merton developed a close friendship, forged in the struggles (both external and internal) of the peace movement in those trying days. These letters open a window into the work of these two luminaries to raise the prophetic voice of the Christian tradition while also maintaining social bonds among the peace community and with one another. The complete collection of the Forest letters will appear in two parts: included in this volume of *The Merton Annual* are the letters written between 1961 and 1965, climaxing during the contentious time following the self-immolation of a young Catholic Worker volunteer in front of the United Nations building in New York – an event which initially prompted Merton to request removal of his name from a public list of sponsors of the Catholic Peace Fellowship. Volume 36 will comprise Forest's letters in the period 1966–1968, including that from February 1966 in which he shares with Merton his “rather bleak mood” over the frustrations and apparent futility of the peace movement's work. It was this letter to which Merton responded with the now-famous exhortation, “Do not depend upon the hope of results” (*HGL* 294). The letters provide an occasion not only to mourn the recent passing of Forest, but also to celebrate the ways that he and Merton enriched one another's lives, spirituality and work for peace in a violent world.

Next, we reprint a little-known article by the recently deceased feminist theologian **Rosemary Radford Ruether** that originally appeared five years after Merton's death in *Christianity and Crisis*, a journal founded by Reinhold Niebuhr that highlighted prominent American au-

thors in liberal Christianity. The article, entitled “Monks and Marxists: A Look at the Catholic Left,” offers reflections on the ideological and spiritual orientation of progressive social Catholicism. Ruether reflects on the contrasts between the Marxist-oriented Left more visible in Latin America and the Catholic Left in the US, epitomized by Merton, Dorothy Day and activists such as Philip and Daniel Berrigan. The movements represent different approaches to the hope of achieving social change through temporal politics. A noteworthy element of her analysis is the positive influence she attributes to Merton in shaping the spirituality of the Berrigans and fellow Catholic activists. “Merton helped to form a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest,” Ruether writes. This text offers an important addendum to the critique of monastic withdrawal from the world that Ruether had expressed in her earlier correspondence with Merton.⁴ **Patrick O’Connell’s** Introduction provides some of this context in greater detail.

Another piece of previously unpublished writing we are happy to share is a letter written by Benedictine contemplative **John Main** during a stay in Merton’s hermitage at Gethsemani in November 1976, aptly titled “Letter from a Hermitage.” Main was invited to Gethsemani to give talks on prayer, and during his stay he penned a lengthy letter reflecting on American politics just before President Jimmy Carter was to take office. **Nicholas Scrimenti** presents the letter along with a substantial introductory essay, in which he suggests that Main’s ambition was not so much to write *about* Merton as to *channel* Merton in an effort “to diagnose the challenges, spiritual as much as political, that awaited President Carter as he entered the White House.” The letter will be of obvious interests to followers of John Main, but more generally it illustrates Merton’s prophetic legacy in the tradition of contemplative Christianity. As Scrimenti notes, Main did not often write on current affairs or political topics, yet his time in Merton’s hermitage home inspired Main to bring his contemplative voice to bear on the movements and crises of his day.

Another perspective on the contemplative life appears in an interview with **Brendan Collins**, a former Trappist monk who corresponded with Merton during the 1960s, conducted by **David Odorisio**. From 1962 to 1967, Collins edited the journal *Monastic Studies*, to which Merton was (according to Collins) “the most enthusiastic and most reliable contributor.” The interview ranges over Collins’s early life and encounters with Merton’s writings, their relationship via *Monastic Studies*, and Collins’s

4. Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

ultimate departure from monastic life. Collins describes a period of time during which his letters to Merton were apparently being blocked by Dom James Fox, Abbot of Gethsemani. Collins reports the “painful” anger and indignation that Merton relayed at this imposition of control, offering a new window into Merton’s complex and difficult relationship with his Trappist superiors. Additionally, the interview is accompanied by three calligraphies that Merton sent to Collins in 1965. Collins kept them for many years before donating them to the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University; he says that they continually reminded him of “Merton’s extraordinary generosity and friendship.”

Moving into this volume’s offering of original articles, we begin with a series of essays that highlight Merton’s poetry and other literary writing.

An article by **Matthew Boedy** examines the theological concept of *kenosis*, which is typically understood as a form of self-emptying, expressed most fully in Christ’s surrender to death on the cross. Entitled “Merton, Kenosis and Rhetorical Invention,” Boedy’s article extends prior scholarship on kenosis as a theme in Merton’s life (principally George Kilcourse’s book *Ace of Freedoms*⁵) by locating a kenotic dynamic in Merton’s understanding and use of rhetoric. Boedy argues that rhetoric functions kenotically, for Merton, by “opening a space within the self” for rhetorical invention. Merton was deeply attentive to the use of language, and recognized language as an instrument that could be corrupted in service of power and control. One important step toward liberation, then, is freedom from the impulse to classify, circumscribe and control the world by use of language. Boedy points to a discussion by Merton in *The New Man*⁶ of the Genesis narrative, where Adam participates in the divine creative activity by naming creatures; one element of the Fall is the loss of this creative linguistic freedom. Boedy draws on literary and rhetorical theory to argue for an understanding of Merton’s work as an effort in “kenotic rhetorical invention” aimed at resisting the corruption of language and opening new possibilities for relationship with God and others.

Patrick O’Connell’s article “Apocalypse Now? Thomas Merton as Post-War Poet” offers an in-depth analysis of a fascinating piece of Merton’s poetry: the lengthy title sequence that opens his 1947 volume *Figures for an Apocalypse*.⁷ O’Connell identifies this work as an instance of Merton’s “post-war apocalypticism.” Though this era in Merton’s

5. George A. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

6. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961).

7. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

poetry “ultimately proved to be a passing phase,” O’Connell argues that the poem powerfully illustrates Merton’s wrestling with the destructiveness and evil put on display in World War II – especially in the atomic devastation wrought at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. An especially interesting portion of the poem carries the title “(*Advice to my Friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice, to get away while they still can*),” and depicts three fictional, surreal scenes involving Merton and friends from his New York days. That section concludes with a call to what O’Connell describes as “interior, spiritual warfare” in the face of the threat of atomic destruction. The almost biographical focus of these scenes suggest that Merton’s wrestling with the fact of massive evil was not merely political but also deeply personal, and O’Connell elucidates how this poem sheds light on his state of mind at that point in time.

In similar fashion, an article by **Bret van den Brink** entitled “Compassion’s Sweet Poison: The Sources of Thomas Merton’s ‘Origen’” engages in an extended consideration of Merton’s 1965 poem “Origen,” about the early Christian theologian. Van den Brink casts the poem as a contribution to the rehabilitation of Origen that was already underway by theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac. Through a detailed consideration of the sources of the poem, van den Brink illuminates the influence of these theologians on Merton’s understanding of Origen. Fascinatingly, while van den Brink emphasizes the ambiguity of Origen’s legacy – “all the glory and controversy he inspired” – he also highlights the unifying, “eucharistic” effect that Origen has had on the Christian community over the centuries. He concludes by suggesting that it is an eschatological hope of overcoming divisions in the human family that drives the interpretation of Origen that Merton presents in his poem.

Marcela Raggio examines Merton’s role as a connector among creative friends and colleagues by studying the four published issues of *Monks Pond*,⁸ the magazine that Merton edited in 1968. Merton started *Monks Pond* in the final year of his life as a venue for poetry and “some unusual prose,” as he wrote in the Introduction to the first issue. Merton solicited contributions from his friends, and from friends of his friends, and published four issues. While *Monks Pond* was an eclectic assembly of texts, Raggio’s article, “‘Frogs in One Pond’: An Approach to Thomas Merton’s *Monks Pond*,” argues that it is possible to discern an “underlying cohesion” to the project. She shows that it is a collective, transnational

8. Thomas Merton, ed., *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton’s Little Magazine*, with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy and an Afterword by Patrick Hart, OCSO (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

effort that “shows intellectual networks in action.” Raggio argues that *Monks Pond* is best understood as both an extension of Merton’s written correspondence and also a contribution to 1960s literary counterculture. While *Monks Pond* was a short-lived endeavor, Raggio persuasively encourages readers to appreciate its significance as part of Merton’s overall body of literary output.

The original essay in this volume that most directly engages Merton’s writing on social and political topics is **James Cronin**’s study of the origins and development of the 1962 edited volume *Breakthrough to Peace*.⁹ The book compiles essays on nuclear disarmament by prominent writers including Lewis Mumford, Erich Fromm and Gordon Zahn. The book contains an introduction by Thomas Merton (along with another standalone essay) but, somewhat mysteriously, does not credit any specific editor. As Cronin recounts in “Disarming Discourse: Thomas Merton’s *Breakthrough to Peace*, October 1961–September 1962,” the book was the brainchild of Merton, Wilbur “Ping” Ferry and James Laughlin, and Merton in fact edited the volume but removed his name prior to publication in deference to concerned Trappist censors. Cronin reflects on the development of *Breakthrough to Peace* as an important moment in Merton’s emerging involvement with the peace movement. Cronin argues that through the book project, Merton aimed both to bolster the credibility of the position in favor of unilateral nuclear disarmament, and also to nudge the Roman Catholic Church toward a more categorically abolitionist stance.

Alicia Mendonça-Richards offers an essay entitled “The Relevance of *New Seeds of Contemplation* to Contemporary Pastoral Practice,” which adopts a lens that is practical, rather than merely historical or exegetical. She explores the utility of *New Seeds*¹⁰ as a window into Merton’s own spirituality and the relevance of contemplation to pastoral practice. She situates her analysis in light of contemporary challenges facing pastoral practitioners, including influences of pluralism and secularism, as well as climate change and growing appreciation of Christianity’s lineage of ecological destruction. In the face of these challenges, Mendonça-Richards argues that Merton’s articulation of the nature of contemplation in *New Seeds* provides an essential guide for how contemporary people might “cultivate loving awareness of God through contemplation.” Particularly interesting is the way that Mendonça-Richards focuses on Merton’s revisions to that text from its original form, published in 1949 as *Seeds of*

9. [Thomas Merton, ed.], *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

10. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

Contemplation.¹¹ Those revisions, she shows, reflected the expanding horizons of Merton's spirituality, and highlight the aspects of his mature contemplative outlook that are especially relevant to contemporary pastoral practitioners – indeed, to all those who travel on the spiritual journey.

Finally, an especially wide-ranging essay by **Aaron K. Kerr** entitled “Earth Alive in the Third Space” reflects on the prophetic potential of Thomas Merton's work in a world dominated by consumerism. Discussing a trio of American intellectual giants – William James, W. E. B. Du Bois and Rachel Carson – Kerr illuminates the ways that modern economic patterns have given rise to spiritual distraction, societal fragmentation and economic degradation. Resisting these trends, Kerr argues, Merton sought a “third space” outside “the tension of world affirmation and world negation.” Kerr finds that alternative way of being exemplified most fully in Merton's written correspondence and the personalist orientation that Merton's letters embody. Drawing on Merton's dialogue with fellow monk Jean Leclercq, Kerr invites readers to consider what options might be available for contemplative life today – and to seek it especially in relationship with others.

As always, the volume concludes with a bibliographic review of new works by or about Merton published in 2021, written by co-editor **Deborah Pope Kehoe**, and a number of reviews of recent books. The work compiled in this volume invites us to look in a number of different directions: backward into history, deeply into the text of Merton's writing and forward into a future that is ever unfolding before us.

11. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).