

## Recognizing Contexts: A Bibliographic Review of 2023

---

*Bernadette McNary-Zak*

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and of my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born.<sup>1</sup>

With these opening lines from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton positions himself in context. This bibliographic review of select publications from 2023 recognizes the ongoing study of Merton's life and works in various contexts. The review begins with books by Merton. It then turns to books about, featuring, and including Merton. Articles are discussed in the final section of the review.<sup>2</sup>

### Books by Merton

While no new volumes by Merton appeared this year, translated editions continue to bring Merton's writings into non-English contexts. Among those books appearing in 2023 is a revised and updated Spanish translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.<sup>3</sup> As well, Spanish translations of *A Course in Desert Spirituality: Fifteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*<sup>4</sup> and *Thoughts in Solitude*<sup>5</sup> have been released. A traditional Chinese translation of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*<sup>6</sup> was also pub-

---

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 3.

2. I am grateful to Paul Pearson and David Golemboski for reading earlier drafts of this essay.

3. *La Montaña de los Siete Círculos: Autobiografía*, revised Spanish trans. by Francisco Rafael de Pascual, OCSO and Fernando Beltrán Llavador of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Bilbao: Mensajero, 2023).

4. *Curso Sobre los Padres del Desierto en Quince Lecciones*, Spanish trans. by José Ángel Velasco Garcia of *A Course in Desert Spirituality* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2023).

5. *Pensamientos en Soledad*, Spanish trans. and introduction by Fernando Beltrán Llavador of *Thoughts in Solitude* (Maliaño: Sal Terrae, 2023).

6. *Yin Xiū Qidǎo de Fēnwéi*, traditional Chinese trans. by Dǔ Jiàn Wēi of *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Taipei, Taiwan: Guerrilla Publishing, 2023).

lished. *No Man Is an Island*,<sup>7</sup> *The Living Bread*,<sup>8</sup> and a new edition of *Thoughts in Solitude*<sup>9</sup> are now accessible in Portuguese.

### Books about Merton

Several books published in 2023 deepen our understanding of Merton's life and thought in biographical and social contexts. In *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*,<sup>10</sup> William Meegan chronicles the life of John Paul Merton, the younger brother of Thomas Merton. Beginning with snapshots of his parents, Ruth Jenkins and Owen Merton, Meegan provides a chronologically structured account that offers a distinct perspective on this sibling relationship. For more about this book, see Monica Weis' review in this issue of *The Merton Annual*.

The final days of Merton's life focus *Thomas Merton's Betrayers: The Case against Abbot James Fox and Author John Howard Griffin*<sup>11</sup> by Hugh Turley and David Martin. In this book, Turley and Martin extend their previous examination of the days surrounding Merton's death.<sup>12</sup> After a systematic review of the extant evidence, the authors contend that "It greatly dishonors his [Merton's] memory for the widely believed story of how he died, perpetuated by his own home abbey, to be the precise opposite, the purest embodiment of falsehood" (209). Paul R. Dekar, who also reviewed the authors' 2018 book,<sup>13</sup> assesses this recent publication for *The Merton Annual*.<sup>14</sup>

In *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights*,<sup>15</sup> Edward Vinski ob-

7. *Nenhum Homen é Uma Ilha*, Portuguese trans. by Jorge Nunes of *No Man Is an Island* (Alfragide: Lue de Papel, 2023).

8. *O Pão Vivo*, Portuguese trans. by Monjas do Mosteiro da Virgem of *The Living Bread* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2023).

9. *Na Liberdade da Solidao*, Portuguese trans. by Monjas do Mosteiro da Virgem of *Thoughts in Solitude*, 8th ed. (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2023).

10. William J. Meegan, *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*, Foreword by Christopher Pramuk (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023); see also the review in *The Merton Seasonal* (Fall 2023) 31-37 by Jeffrey Kiernan ("Ordinary Life, Extraordinary Person").

11. Hugh Turley and David Martin, *Thomas Merton's Betrayers: The Case against Abbot James Fox and Author John Howard Griffin* (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2023).

12. See Hugh Turley and David Martin, *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton: An Investigation*. (Hyattsville, MD: McCabe Publishing, 2018); see also Hugh Turley and David Martin, "Black like Whom: Mystery Man – John Howard Griffin," *Culture Wars* 42.3 (February 2023) 28-39.

13. See Paul Dekar, "A Challenge to the Standard Account," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.4 (Winter 2018) 37-39.

14. See also Gray Matthews, "Stumbling Blocks and Tenterhooks," *The Merton Seasonal* 49.3 (Fall 2024) 31-32.

15. Edward Vinski, *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights* (Newcastle-upon-

serves that “Merton brought a certain perspective to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s – a white man’s perspective, an outsider’s perspective, a religious perspective. I believe he can bring that same perspective to the racial concerns plaguing the United States today” (5). Vinski follows the development of Merton’s “perspective” with the biographical arc of Merton’s adult life, tracing early reflections on race to a general concern with Civil Rights. See Christopher Pramuk’s more thorough review later in this issue.<sup>16</sup>

Merton’s attention to social justice issues also features prominently in *Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism*.<sup>17</sup> This book offers previously published and new material by Daniel P. Horan. The book’s essays are grouped into five topic areas with a brief introduction. Attention is given to Merton in relationship as signaled by the first essay, titled “Seeds of Inspiration,” which invites readers to consider Merton’s characterization of his “wide-ranging correspondence as an ‘apostolate of friendship’” (8). Horan observes that this apostolate “didn’t end with his sudden, tragic death. He continues to bring together friends who tend the living and dynamic plant that has grown from the seed of his life and work” (8).<sup>18</sup> Read Eric Martin’s review of this book, which considers its use in the classroom, in this issue of *The Merton Annual*.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude this section of the bibliographic review, two previously published books about Merton were released in translation in 2023, thereby further extending and expanding the study of Merton. Paul Pearson’s edited work, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*, originally published in English in 2020, is now available in a German edition.<sup>20</sup> Maria Cristina Inogés Sanz’s study, *La Sinfonia Femenina (In-*

Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023).

16. See also Anne Pearson, “Growing towards Racial Justice Advocacy,” *The Merton Seasonal* 49.1 (Spring 2024) 49-51.

17. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2023).

18. A version of this essay was published as “Seeds of Inspiration: The Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton (1915–1968)” in *The Merton Annual* 31 (2018) 49-55. See also Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “Thomas Merton’s wisdom is still timely and prophetic for today’s Christians,” *National Catholic Reporter*; available at: <https://www.ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/thomas-mertons-wisdom-still-timely-and-prophetic-todays-christians/> [accessed 16 Nov. 2023].

19. See also George Kehoe, “Fruitful Provocation,” *The Merton Seasonal* 49.1 (Spring 2024) 44-48.

20. *Schau ins Paradies: Thomas Merton und die Fotografie*, German trans. by Thorsten F. Sheu and Regine Lampert of *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* edited by Paul M. Pearson (Darmstadt: Sprachlichter Verlag, 2023).

*completa*) de Thomas Merton, originally published in Spanish in 2018,<sup>21</sup> can now be read in Portuguese.<sup>22</sup> This thematic work explores Merton's relationships with women and constructions of the feminine, beginning with his mother and her untimely death. Drawing on the Spanish edition of this book in an article titled, "The Feminine in Merton's Life: Some Notes on His Experience with Women," Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer highlights Sanz's argument that the "lost feminine archetype of his late mother was later recovered by Merton in the abbey. The process of recovering the motherhood archetype included the presence of Mary, as an idealized woman."<sup>23</sup>

### Books Featuring Merton

Merton serves as a significant interlocutor in three books highlighted here. Each book evinces the reception of Merton's life and thought in a personal context. Esther de Waal welcomes Merton as a guide and companion in *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey*.<sup>24</sup> De Waal draws on Merton's words and photographs to invite readers into prayer and reflection. Published in the United States in 1993,<sup>25</sup> this 2023 edition includes the original foreword by Henri Nouwen and a new foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston. This issue of *The Merton Annual* contains a review by Emma McDonald Kennedy.

James Finley recalls Merton's role as a mentor in *The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation*.<sup>26</sup> Finley envisions healing as a rich, dynamic, multi-dimensional site for reflection and transformation. He writes that "In his role as my novice master, Merton accepted me into his graces and began to guide me in the art of learning to be supple and responsive to the mysterious process in which God and I kept yielding ourselves over into each other" (70). See the review by Kathleen Tarr in this issue.<sup>27</sup>

---

21. Maria Cristina Inogés Sanz, *La sinfonia femenina (incompleta) de Thomas Merton* (Madrid: PPC, 2018).

22. Maria Cristina Inogés Sanz, *La sinfonia femenina (incompleta) de Thomas Merton*, Portuguese trans. by Paulo Ramos (Prior Velho, Portugal: Paulinas Editora, 2023).

23. Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, "The Feminine in Merton's Life: Some Notes on His Experience with Women," *The Merton Annual* 36 (2023) 68.

24. Esther de Waal, *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey*, Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023).

25. Esther de Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993).

26. James Finley, *The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023).

27. See also Gregory J. Ryan, "Finley's Choices (and Ours)," *The Merton Seasonal* 49.2 (Summer 2024) 39-40.

Dr. Nass Cannon, Jr., a self-described “broken healer” (1), draws inspiration from the writings of Merton. *In Search of the Healing Spirit*,<sup>28</sup> edited by Nass’ children and published posthumously, recognizes this influence. Persistently upholding the place of suffering and the value of tenderheartedness, this book explores brokenness and healing from a range of perspectives. Jose Andujar reviews this book for *The Merton Annual*.

### Books Including Merton

A number of books published in 2023 incorporate aspects of Merton’s life and thought in specialized contexts. Richard Lischer showcases memory construction in *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir*<sup>29</sup> by observing “the urgency of life-writing in eras of massive disorientation” (1). Lischer thematically organizes and presents the works of twenty-one writers and thinkers. This book, and the third chapter titled, “Journey through Purgatory: Thomas Merton,” are given closer attention in Connie Braun’s review.<sup>30</sup>

Other books in this section of the bibliographic review are grouped here by topic. Four books attend to the lived experience and contemporary relevance of mysticism and spirituality. Carl McColman reads Merton’s experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in downtown Louisville through the lens of Jesus’ transfiguration in *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism: An Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality*,<sup>31</sup> a revised edition of the original version published in 2010. McColman proposes that “The light that transfigured Jesus’ face and even his clothes is the same light that Merton saw shining out of everyone – a light that could only elicit the response of love. This light . . . forms the heart of Christian mysticism” (14). Insights from Merton are also included in *Martyrs, Monks, and Mystics: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*,<sup>32</sup> by Michael J. McClymond and *A Wild and Sacred Call: Nature – Psyche*

---

28. Nass Cannon, Jr., *In Search of the Healing Spirit*, edited by Clare E. B. Cannon, Bryant Cannon and John Cannon (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2023); see also Deborah Pope Kehoe, “Sharing the Healing Spirit,” *The Merton Seasonal* 48.4 (Winter 2023) 30-32.

29. Richard Lischer, *Our Hearts Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

30. See also Bonnie Thurston, “Frameworks for Faithful Living,” *The Merton Seasonal* 49.3 (Fall 2024) 29-30.

31. Carl McColman, *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism: An Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

32. Michael J. McClymond, *Martyrs, Monks, and Mystics: An Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2023).

– *Spirit*,<sup>33</sup> by Will W. Adams. More substantive treatment of Merton is found in *Modern Mystics: An Introduction*,<sup>34</sup> by Bernard McGinn and reviewed by Patrick O’Connell in this issue.<sup>35</sup>

Another pair of books considers morality and ethics. Eric Martin draws on Merton’s “unifying epiphany” (xiii) at the corner of Fourth and Walnut to interrogate questions of contemporary relevance in *The Writing on the Wall: Signs of Faith against Fascism*.<sup>36</sup> Marjorie Corbman invites readers to consider Malcolm X’s distinct theological, apocalyptic worldview in conversation with other prominent figures in *Divine Rage: Malcolm X’s Challenge to White Christians*.<sup>37</sup> Corbman examines Merton and the Black Liberation movement in the chapter titled, “Of Malcolm and Merton: Black Power Contemplatives” (144-73).

A final group of books appeal directly to inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Lucien Miller hearkens to Merton in *Hands of the Buddha: The Life and Legacy of Shigeto Vincent Oshida, OP*.<sup>38</sup> Miller observes that “Oshida remained convinced that to follow Jesus he did not have to stop being a Buddhist. He never doubted that it was not only possible, but also necessary for him to reconcile his love of Jesus with the Buddhist wisdom that had so profoundly shaped his understanding of what it is to be human. His conviction resonates with that of my mentors and guide in this endeavor, the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968)” (xxiii). Susan McCaslin highlights Merton in *Consider*,<sup>39</sup> a deeply engaging book of poems that invites readers to employ the title as lexically intended, emphasizing close examination and clear attention. *Consider* is structured in five sections: “Cosmic Egg 1-33,” “Apocrypha,” “Consider,” “Cracking the Jesus Koans,” and “A Suite on Robin Blaser’s Libretto for *The Last Supper*.” In these poems, McCaslin engages a range of themes and texts from across religious traditions. Two explicit references are made to Merton: the first, in a poem titled, “Living Buddha,

---

33. Will W. Adams, *A Wild and Sacred Call: Nature – Psyche – Spirit* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023).

34. Bernard McGinn, *Modern Mystics: An Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 2023).

35. See also Daniel P. Horan, “Meeting Merton among the Mystics,” *The Merton Seasonal* 49.2 (Summer 2024) 36-38.

36. Eric Martin, *The Writing on the Wall: Signs of Faith against Fascism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2023).

37. Marjorie Corbman, *Divine Rage: Malcolm X’s Challenge to White Christians* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023).

38. Lucien Miller, *Jesus in the Hands of Buddha: The Life and Legacy of Shigeto Vincent Oshida, OP* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023).

39. Susan McCaslin, *Consider* (Thornhill, ON: Aolus House, 2023).



Living Christ,” signals Merton’s influence on Thich Nhat Hanh (25); and the second, in the opening to the book section titled, “Cracking the Jesus Koans” (57), is a passage from Merton’s *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

### Articles

Articles published in 2023 address assorted topics related to Merton’s life and works in varying contexts. Here, again, they are grouped by topic. Two articles examine periods of transition in developmental terms. Michael Plekon deploys the sociological category of alternation to explore shifts in Merton’s belief system and thought in “Merton: Stranger or at Home: Alternations and a Vision.”<sup>40</sup> Peter Ellis focuses squarely on Merton’s move to the hermitage later in his vocation in “Walking out of a Door into the Fresh Air.”<sup>41</sup>

Merton’s book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, originally released in 1948, receives specific attention in several articles. One article by Paul M. Pearson recounts events leading to and following publication of the book in October 1948, and explores reasons for the book’s early and sustained success.<sup>42</sup> In another article, Pearson reads the American edition of the book alongside the British edition, entitled *Elected Silence*, locating several key differences for closer examination.<sup>43</sup> Bonnie Thurston contributes an analysis of the book in the article entitled “Why Not Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*?”<sup>44</sup> Thurston argues that the book serves as a spiritual autobiography “at the outset of the journey” (29).

Personal relationships center two articles. Fiona Gardner considers Merton’s familial bonds in “Missing in Action: The Relationship between Thomas and John Paul Merton.”<sup>45</sup> Here, Gardner activates the metaphor of “missing in action” – a phrase taken from the poem Merton wrote upon

40. Michael Plekon, “Merton: Stranger or at Home: Alternations and a Vision,” *Studies in Spirituality* 32/33 (2022-2023) 423-37.

41. Peter Ellis, “Walking out of a Door into the Fresh Air,” *The Merton Journal* 30.2 (Advent 2023) 44-53.

42. Paul M. Pearson, “Bellarmine Magazine Book Club – *The Seven Storey Goldmine*: The Extraordinary Success of Thomas Merton’s Autobiography,” *Bellarmino* (Spring 2023) 32-35; available at: <https://www.bellarmino.edu/magazine/article/magazine-2023/2023/05/08/the-seven-storey-goldmine-the-extraordinary-success-of-thomas-mertons-autobiography> [accessed 8 November 2024].

43. Paul M. Pearson, “Why I Must ‘Elect Silence’ and not Talk about *The Seven Storey Mountain*,” *The Merton Journal* 30.2 (Advent 2023) 12-15.

44. Bonnie Thurston, “Why Not Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*?” *The Merton Journal* 30.2 (Advent 2023) 28-30.

45. Fiona Gardner, “Missing in Action: The Relationship between Thomas and John Paul Merton,” *The Merton Journal* 30.1 (Eastertide 2023) 3-10.

learning of the death of John Paul – to explore their fraternal relationship. Acknowledging the one-sided perspective of the extant source material (only from Thomas), she contends that “The relationship between the brothers was one characterized by separation and loss” (3). Sylvia Grevel highlights Merton’s relationship with his Columbia colleague, Ad Reinhardt, in “A Sense of Place in Emptiness: Ad Reinhardt’s ‘Small Black Cross Painting.’”<sup>46</sup> Drawing on Merton’s developing understanding of art, Grevel argues that Merton characterized this particular artistic work as “a most religious” painting (51) “because it functions as an icon” (57).

Merton’s engagement with contemporary thinkers is also explored. James T. Keane examines Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh in the context of the antiwar movement.<sup>47</sup> Paul M. Pearson uses Merton’s reading recommendation of *The Fire Next Time* as a launching point in “‘A Kind of White James Baldwin’: Thomas Merton and James Baldwin.”<sup>48</sup> Swasti Bhattacharyya and Bernadette McNary-Zak address Merton’s reading of Vinoba Bhavé’s *Talks on the Gita* during his vocational crisis in 1960.<sup>49</sup>

Merton’s influence is highlighted in a final group of articles. Marcela Raggio provides a study of Ernesto Cardenal, a former novice under Merton.<sup>50</sup> Raggio draws on the work of Enrique Dussel and others to position Cardenal as a socially engaged contemplative influenced by Merton and informed by experience, tradition and liberation theology. Finally, Ian Randall explores Merton’s “influence among Baptists” (3) through the work of the Baptist theologian E. Glenn Hinson.<sup>51</sup> Randall demonstrates that “Contact with Merton had broadened Hinson’s outlook and also strengthened his ecumenical ties, and this in turn affected other Baptists” (8). Karen Karper Fredette’s reflective essay, “How Merton’s Love of Solitude Influences Us today”<sup>52</sup> weaves Merton’s “maturing

46. Sylvia Grevel, “A Sense of Place in Emptiness: Ad Reinhardt’s ‘Small Black Cross’ Painting,” *The Merton Journal* 30.1 (Eastertide 2023) 51-60.

47. James T. Keane, “Thich Nhat Hanh, Thomas Merton and the Modern Antiwar Movement,” *America* (31 January 2023); available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2023/01/31/cbc-column-thich-nhat-hanh-244635> [accessed 10 November 2024].

48. Paul M. Pearson, “‘A Kind of White James Baldwin’: Thomas Merton and James Baldwin,” *Cithara* 62.2 (May 2023) 53-63.

49. Swasti Bhattacharyya and Bernadette McNary-Zak, “Merton Discerning His Svadharma,” *The Merton Journal* 30.1 (Eastertide 2023) 26-33.

50. Marcela Raggio, “Ernesto Cardenal: A Latin American Liberation Mystic,” *Religions* 14.5 (2023); available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/5/655> [accessed 25 November 2024].

51. Ian Randall, “Thomas Merton and Baptist Spirituality,” *The Merton Journal* 30.2 (Advent 2023) 3-10.

52. Karen Karper Fredette, “How Merton’s Love of Solitude Influences Us Today,”



grasp of what the hermit life truly entailed” (17) with her own experience of various forms of solitary life in the Church. Merton’s influence on David Scott, a foundational member of The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland who died in 2023 is featured as well in the Eastertide issue of *The Merton Journal* from that year.<sup>53</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

In “*The Seven Storey Mountain and My Crisis of Vocation*,” the late Merton scholar and theologian Gregory Hillis recalls kinship with Merton during a period of discernment.<sup>54</sup> Hillis writes that, despite distinct differences, “His [Merton’s] story became intertwined with mine, and as such, he immediately became a companion, even a friend” (61). The recognition of Merton as a fellow human being – a recognition present here and in the other published works included in this bibliographic review – further acknowledges Merton’s legacy.

---

*The Merton Journal* 30.1 (Eastertide 2023) 16-22.

53. See David Scott, “Poem” (14-15); David Scott, “Thomas Merton – Theologian of the Cross” (23-25); Paul Pearson, “Creating ‘A Culture God Grew Warm In’: David Scott” (11-13); Danny Sullivan, “My Friend David” (47-48); and Elizabeth Baron, “David Scott – My Parish Priest” (49) in *The Merton Journal* 30.1 (Eastertide 2023).

54. Gregory Hillis, “*The Seven Storey Mountain and My Crisis of Vocation*,” *The Merton Journal* 30.2 (Advent 2023) 58-64.