

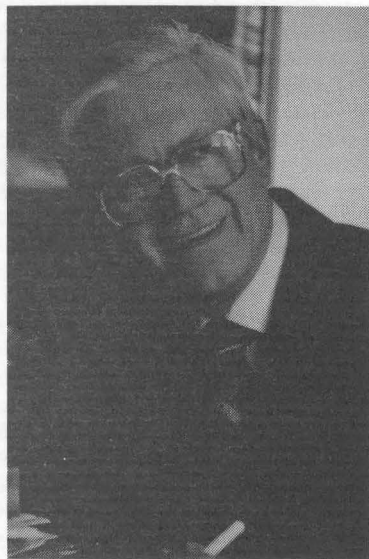
THE FARMER FROM NELSON COUNTY

Presidential Address in Celebration of
 “The Joy of the Cosmic Dance”
 ITMS First General Meeting, 25 May 1989

By **William H. Shannon**

In 1983, when I was doing the initial work on the editing of the first volume of the Merton Letters, I went to Canterbury to visit Canon A. M. Allchin, who presently is Director of the Ecumenical Centre of St. Theosevia in Oxford, but who, at the time of my visit, was canon residentiary of Canterbury Cathedral in Kent. Donald Allchin, as his friends call him, was a correspondent for whom Thomas Merton had a special affection. Three different times Donald visited him at Gethsemani. On one of these occasions, he told me, they visited the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill and went into Lexington for lunch. While they were having their meal, an effusive, well-dressed Lexington woman came over to their table. She had obviously seen the high white Anglican collar that Donald was wearing. She gushed over him: “I am sure you are an Anglican priest. Welcome to America and Kentucky. It is so nice to meet a clergyman from England.” Donald thanked her and introduced himself. There was a brief awkward silence. The woman looked, with some puzzlement, at Merton who was dressed in overalls and denim jacket, and then said: “I am afraid I don’t recognize your friend.” Before Donald had the chance to introduce him, Merton spoke up, with a note of pride in his voice: “Oh, I’m a farmer from Nelson County.”

“I’m a farmer from Nelson County.” This simple statement says a number of things about Thomas Merton. First of all, it shows something of his fun-loving simplicity and his readiness to dispense with formalities and titles. He would, one thinks, have made a very uncomfortable monsignor, supposing that such titles were handed out to Cistercians. He didn’t care much for the “famous author” bit or the reputation as the monk who brought fame and fortune to a



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Trappist monastery. He was quite content to be himself. Indeed, he enjoyed identifying himself with the farmers from Nelson County.

His introduction of himself as “a farmer from Nelson County” also makes clear another side of his character: his lifelong attachment to geography. Geography plays an important role in his life story. It is a significant factor in much of his poetry, even though — like Elias of his poem — he sometimes becomes his own geography. When in April of 1967, Etta Gullick and her husband came from Oxford on a trip to the United States, Etta wanted to visit Merton with whom she had carried on an extensive correspondence. She told me herself that, while she had come to Gethsemani to talk with him about mysticism and spiritual direction, she found that Merton actually spent more time speaking with her husband about his speciality: he was a teacher of geography at St. Edmund’s Hall, Oxford. And surely it is no accident that Merton’s last book bore the title *The Geography of Lograire*.

At any rate, in the name of the officers of the International Thomas Merton Society, I want to welcome all of you to this celebration in remembrance of the one-time “farmer from Nelson County.” Sunday, when we go to the monastery for the Eucharist and a visit to the hermitage, we shall be in Nelson County, which means we shall be in “Merton Country.” But, of course, we are in “Merton Country” right now. The city of Louisville meant a great deal to Merton. He came here with some regularity, often visiting his good friend, Tommie O’Callaghan. It was here too that he singled out Bellarmine College to be the archival depository of his unpublished materials. And, we cannot forget that it was in Louisville that he had his famous “visionary insight” (one that has perhaps received more attention than it ought), where he had a deep experience of his oneness with all the people hurrying about in and out of various stores at the Corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets. (I say in parentheses that we would like to have planned a bus trip to that site for all those who might feel that they too could have a mystical experience there. But, regretfully, we had to abandon that as one of the Meeting projects, since — as many of you know — there is no longer a Fourth and Walnut in Louisville. It has been replaced by Fourth and Muhammad Ali Boulevard. Merton, I am sure, would have applauded that change of name. Indeed, he might have had an even deeper mystical experience, had the streets been so named in 1958.) Suffice it to say that Louisville, for sure, is “Merton Country.”

While I welcome you this evening to “Merton Country,” I am very much conscious that those of you who are from outside Louisville or Kentucky are yourselves people who come from “Merton Country.” Marlboro cigarettes has billboard signs all over the countryside which read: “This is Marlboro country.” Actually I don’t want to call attention to a cigarette ad, but I think there are many places in this country, where a sign could appropriately be erected saying: “This is Merton Country.”

When I speak of “Merton Country,” I am not talking about places that might want to put him on a pedestal and, in awed and reverent terms, laud him from afar. Nor do I have in mind places that would consider him as the “Delphic Oracle” of our day, whose words are mysteriously inspired and unerring. Rather I am talking, in the first instance, of places of serious study and research, where his writing is reflected on in a critical way, where that writing is seen with its many flashes of intuitive insight and creative genius, with its sustained passages of moving poetry and prose, but also with its moments of weakness, fallibility and, at times, of just plain bad writing.

But Merton’s works are not simply the domain of scholars. Hence when I speak of “Merton Country,” I am thinking not just of research and study centers, college and university departments of literature or religion with Merton courses (all of these continuing to grow in number): I am thinking also of places, removed from academe, where Merton’s writings serve a deep spiritual need for countless numbers of people: people who are able to profit from his spiritual insights, precisely because they identify with him as someone very human, very much like themselves. What they find in Thomas Merton is not some kind of super human being, but a person who is able to articulate with a certain clarity many of the things which they have been struggling to say, but were at a loss for right words with which to say them. His words become the articulation of their own experience. The questions he asked voice the questions with which they are wrestling, but which perhaps they did not recognize as their questions till he put them in words.

We come to “Merton Country” and we come from “Merton Country.” The purpose of our gathering is not, in any primary sense, to honor him (the honors that really matter he has already received, we trust, from the One He lived to serve). Rather we come to share with one another how his story has intersected

with ours; and also how our stories have, because of him, intersected with one another. The speakers at our various sessions will have important things to say, no doubt: how Merton influenced them and what, they believe, he is still able to say to us today. But perhaps as important as what the speakers have to say to us are the things we may be able to say to one another, as we share conversations and meals and prayer together. It will be good for all of us, if we are willing to share our “Merton Story” with each other.

I have been asked many times such questions as: How did you get to be interested in Merton? Did you ever meet him? What difference, if any, has he made in your life? Why do you think he continues to exercise an attraction in your life? Without in any way wanting to diminish the importance of the rich fare prepared for us in the many formal sessions, I would yet like to say that it may well be that the most precious remembrances many of us will take home from this Meeting may be our sharing with one another of our own answers to questions of this kind.

When the officers of the International Thomas Merton Society gathered more than a year ago to plan this meeting, we tried to think of a theme that would be basic to Merton’s thought and, at the same time, broad enough to cover all the many topics we hoped would be discussed. The theme which we finally chose was “the Cosmic Dance.” Accordingly, I want to extend to you the invitation to join, at least for these four days in “the cosmic dance.” To understand what is involved in the invitation, you might want to read the final chapter of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which has the title “The General Dance.”

New Seeds, as you know, was a large scale revision of a 1949 work entitled *Seeds of Contemplation*. This final chapter “The General Dance” is entirely new. We might want to ask: where did he get the idea for such a chapter? Very possibly from his reading. I say this because Merton, not surprisingly, was influenced in what he wrote by what he happened to be reading at the time. It may be of help, then, to look at what he was reading in 1961, the year he did the revision of *Seeds*.

On January 17, 1961, Merton wrote to Edward Deming Andrews, a well-known authority on the sect known as Shakers. His letter mentions a visit to Shakertown at Pleasant Hill in Kentucky and describes how moved he was, looking out of the attic of the old guesthouse through the branches of a cedar tree at the quiet field in which the Shakers used to dance. Then he mentions that, in an offprint of Coomaraswamy, he had run across “a lovely old carol about the dancing of God with man in the mystery of the incarnation.” “The carol,” he continues, “is an ancient English one. In it the Lord speaks of His coming at Christmas in the following words: ‘Tomorrow is my dancing day . . .’” (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 34).

The carol, which may be found in *The Oxford Book of Carols*, is a striking one. It is made up of eleven stanzas, to each of which the same refrain is added: “Sing, O my love, o my love, / my love, my love. / This have I done for my true love.” The first two stanzas are about Christmas and the Incarnation. The first says “Tomorrow shall be my dancing day / I would my true love did so chance / to see the legend of my play / to call my true love to the dance.” The phrase “to call my true love to the dance,” or a variation of it, is repeated at the end of each stanza, prior to the refrain inviting the true love to sing. Hence each stanza concludes with an invitation to dance and to sing. The second stanza is also about the Incarnation and the notion of the dance begins to take on wider dimensions. “Then was I born of a virgin pure, / of her I took fleshly substance; / Thus was I knit to man’s nature, / to call my true love to the dance.”

The stanzas go on to speak of the temptations of Jesus and also of his passion. Judas, when he sold Jesus, “his covetousness for to advance,” tells the guards with him: “Mark whom I kiss, the same do hold / The same is he shall lead the dance.” The next to the last stanza speaks of the Resurrection: “I rose again on the third day, / Up to my true love and the dance.” And the final stanza speaks of the Ascension: “Then up to heaven did I ascend, / Where now I dwell in sure substance / On the right hand of God that man [and woman] / May come unto the general dance.”

“The General Dance” — this is the title Merton gives to that final chapter of *New Seeds*. The chapter is about God’s Presence in His universe, drawing us out of life’s seeming dualities and enabling us to discover our true reality by discovering our oneness with Him. It is only in the last three paragraphs that he talks explicitly about the dance. On the last page but one, he urges us to forget ourselves in order to see God playing and diverting Himself in the garden of His creation. We are invited to do this, in order that “we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious, cosmic dance” (p. 296). It would be difficult not to see in these words of Merton’s the language of the ancient carol I quoted earlier.

Besides this passage — about the call to follow the Lord in His mysterious cosmic dance — there are, in the concluding paragraphs of that last chapter, two more references to the “cosmic dance.” In one Merton writes that, when there is stillness and awakedness and true emptiness in our lives, we have a purity of vision that gives us a *glimpse of the cosmic dance*. In the other reference he makes clear that, however much we misunderstand the true realities of life, we cannot “stain the joy of the cosmic dance which is always there.” He goes on: “Indeed, we are in the midst of it and it is in the midst of us, for it beats in our very blood, whether we want it to or not.”

The concluding section of *New Seeds* switches adjectives and the cosmic dance becomes the general dance. “We are invited,” he tells us, “to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the *general dance*” (p. 297). It is hardly a coincidence that Merton’s final chapter and, indeed, his book ends with the very same words that form the conclusion of the carol, “My Dancing Day,” namely, the words “*the general dance*.”

What is meant by the *general dance* or the *cosmic dance*? It is the universe, the cosmos that God made, moving in perfect harmony with the Creator. This harmonious oneness with Himself/Herself was God’s gift to His creation, especially to the man and the woman He/She created. In a sense also, it was a gift that God gave to Himself/Herself, if one may speak so. Merton writes that the point of the early chapters of Genesis is “that God made the world as a garden in which He Himself took delight.” God also made the man and the woman and made them in His/Her own image, so that, through the light of reason, they might know all the other creatures and give them their names. But that was not all: He/She also gave them a higher light that goes beyond names and forms, a light through which God’s human creatures are able to meet Him/Her, not through the medium of things, but in His/Her own simplicity. In a sentence that gives us a strong hint about what he means by the general dance, Merton writes: “*The union of the simple light of God with the simple light of [the human] spirit, in love, is contemplation.*” He goes on to say: “The two simplicities are one. They form, as it were, an *emptiness* in which there is no addition, but rather the taking away of names, of forms, of content, of subject matter, of identities. In this meeting there is not so much a fusion of entities as a disappearance of entities.” Making the link with the beginnings of Genesis once again, Merton says: “The Bible speaks of this very simply: “In the breeze after noon, God came to walk with Adam [and Eve] in Paradise” . . . In the free *emptiness* of the breeze . . . God and [His human creatures] are together, not speaking in words or syllables or forms. And that was the meaning of creation, and of Paradise.”

In that *emptiness* that knows no dualities, but only the oneness of simplicity, the walk of God with His/Her human creatures in unison and tranquil accord is poetry, not prose. That is to say, it is the dance. For what is dance but harmonious movement in perfect oneness and beyond all dualities and multiplicities? In the dance there are not many movements, but one movement. The dancers forget themselves. They lose themselves in the dance and thus are emptied of any separate self. And it is in that emptiness that the movement of the dance goes on.

Merton speaks of that emptiness in yet another sentence on the final page of the chapter from *New Seeds* about “The General Dance.” He writes: “For the world and time are the dance of the Lord *in emptiness*.” And they are our dance too, as long as we allow Him/Her to raise us above all dualities by making us one with Himself/Herself (See p. 294).

Yet, when He/She made us, He/She made us free. We have a choice. We can be a self that refuses to lose itself in the dance — which means that we are unwilling to rise above the dualities that illusion projects on reality. Or we can be a self that is aware of its non-separateness and of its oneness with all of reality and with its divine Source. And when we are aware of this true self — which is emptiness, for it is only in God — then, in all truth — we belong to the dance: To put it in Merton’s words, “if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all, we might be able to hear His call and follow Him in His mysterious cosmic dance.”

New Seeds, coming twelve years after *Seeds*, offers a much more realistic understanding of the human condition than its predecessor. In fact, it was through one of the chapters of this same book that Merton launched his “career” as a writer on war and peace. For in September of 1961, after having received the approval of the censors for the publication of *New Seeds*, Merton immediately sent chapter 16, entitled “The Root of War is Fear,” to Dorothy Day for publication in the October issue of *The Catholic Worker*.

To the chapter he attached three long paragraphs, uncensored and quite incendiary. He spoke of a world sick with war-madness, and nowhere so sick as in America. He called people to what he said was the one task which God has imposed upon us in our day, namely, to work for the total abolition of war. And he manages to suggest a whole program for peace. All in three paragraphs! And uncensored ones at that!

This was Merton's entrance — made with a spirit of fierce indignation — into the peace movement. For the next six months this issue would consume him and inflame practically all his writing. After six months, in April of 1962, he received orders that he was not to publish anything on war and peace; in fact, he was not even to submit such material to the censors. This meant that the book on war and peace that he had completed in the spring of 1962 never got to be published, though big sections of it did eventually get to press, many of them in *Seeds of Destruction*, published in 1964. The book that never got published in its entirety was called *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. Before the ban came down Merton had sent to *The Catholic Worker* a very long article called "We Have to Make Ourselves Heard." It was so huge that it ran through two issues of the *Worker* (May and June of 1962). Merton did not submit it to the censors for it was actually an expansion and clarification of an earlier article which he had written for *Commonweal* (February 9, 1962) and which had been censored. Apparently Merton felt that one trip through the censors per article was enough! In this *Catholic Worker* article, as also in the book *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, Merton has a section in which once again he speaks of "The Dance." But this time it is "The Dance of Death." This dance was, in Merton's words, "the paranoid game of nuclear deterrence" that the two super powers, America and Russia, were playing, "each one desperately hoping to preserve peace by threatening the other with bigger bombs and total annihilation." Merton goes on to say: "Every step in *this political dance of death* brings us inexorably closer to hot war. The closer we get to hot war, the more the theoretical possibility of our total destruction turns into a real probability."

I think it is important for us to see this contrast: a hopeful optimism facing up to a practical realism in Thomas Merton's thinking and writing in the 1960s. This monk who wrote so glowingly about the *cosmic dance*, the wondrous harmony that God wills for His/Her people (the harmony that is contemplation) is also the man who is deeply aware of the greed, the sinfulness, the madness that threaten that cosmic dance and could lead to total destruction. That movement of disharmony, destruction, the spirit of separateness and unhealthy competitiveness that sets people against one another also constitutes a "dance," but it is the "Dance of Death."

It might well be said that one helpful way of understanding Thomas Merton in the 1960s is through the metaphor of the "dance." He was keenly aware of the threat which the "Dance of Death" posed for the world: humanly speaking, it could destroy the harmony of the "cosmic dance." Interestingly, the Christmas carol to which I have referred ("My Dancing Day") has a pertinent verse. Jesus is in the desert and, in the words of the carol, he tells us: "Into the desert I was led, / Where I fasted without substance; / The devil bade me make stones my bread, / To have me *break* my true love's dance."

Despite the magnitude of the threat which he so clearly perceived, "the farmer from Nelson County" yet had a profound faith that he and his world could overcome the destructive forces that threatened the cosmic dance and, in doing so, could respond with joy to the invitation of the Divine Dancer: "I would my true love did so chance / To see the legend of my play, / To call my true love to my dance."

"To my dance": the real dance, after all, is that of the Divine Dancer moving in harmony with the creation He/She loves — that creation which at its deepest level is one with Him/Her as its Source and Ground. The other dance, though it has a reality of its own that we have to deal with, is in ultimate terms illusory. It belongs to the world that is passing. Yet it is present in our midst and, because it is there, we must confront it.

We gather here, therefore, not unmindful of the forces of destruction, alienation and dehumanizing — the dissonant movements of the Dance of Death — which threaten our future and that of all humanity. Yet we gather with confident hope that the Divine Harmony will win out. For we are women and men who, like the "farmer from Nelson County," have caught glimpses of the cosmic dance. Like him, we have no doubt of the final outcome. *The joy of the cosmic dance will surely and finally prevail.*

AND SO, ON WITH THE DANCE!