

## A Feast of Words

Review of

*The Merton Annual Volume 22*

Edited by Gray Matthews and David Belcastro

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Reviewed by **Frederick Smock**

Thomas Merton's poetry has not received as much attention as his essays, meditations and journals, and certainly not as much attention as his youthful autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Yet, Merton came to believe that poetry lay very near the center of his spirituality. In a letter to his publisher, Jay Laughlin, Merton wrote, "perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems now . . . would be in the form of creative writing and lit[erary] criticism" (Merton/Laughlin *Selected Letters* 301); and in the last year of his life, Merton wrote in his journal, "I wish I had done more creative work and less of this trivial, sanctimonious editorializing" (*Other Side of the Mountain* 156).

Thus it is with a glad heart that we receive the latest volume of *The Merton Annual*, edited by David Belcastro and Gray Matthews, which is devoted to considerations of Merton's poetry, a number of them first presented at a conference on Merton's poetry at Bellarmine University in 2007. Merton was a committed writer, even more so, perhaps, than he was a committed monk. As Ross Labrie points out in his essay, "Wholeness in Thomas Merton's Poetry" (41-60), Merton admitted in 1962 that "while it was possible to doubt aspects of his monastic vocation – a doubt that he would 'have to live with' – it was not possible to doubt that he was a writer" (41). In some ways, poetry made possible his monastic vocation. As Labrie notes later in this essay, "The poet, as the artist generally, Merton believed, drew on the subconscious and unconscious in making poems and in particular in making and using symbols. In so doing the poet intuitively sought to unite human beings, nature and God in what Merton called a 'living and sacred synthesis'" (51).

Much of Merton's poetry approaches the sacred through nature – the things of this world – perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in "Three Postcards from the Monastery." As Michael Higgins notes in his essay, "The Priestly Imagination: Thomas Merton and the Poetics of Critique" (11-23), in this poem "the monks have seen ravaged the pure dream of Nature; they have seen Eden invaded with 'tons of silver' . . . America's promise sold for a 'Pittsburgh, in a maze of lights'" (14). It is tempting here to source Merton's choice of Pittsburgh as the denigration of paradise. Jay Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, came from Pittsburgh. His family owned the Laughlin steel works there, and, every Christmas Eve, the young Jay was made to accompany his father into the bowels of the factory, where men toiled in the unholy light of molten metal and flying sparks. It looked, Laughlin wrote, like one of the lower circles of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. One wonders if

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Laughlin did not somehow communicate that image to Merton.

Patrick F. O’Connell notes in his essay, “Islands in the Stream: Thomas Merton’s Poetry of the Early 1950s” (61-105), that “Merton never *completely* stopped writing poetry” (62). Though he took several retirements of various kinds, he kept on writing. He could not *not* write poetry, it seems. He always had another “small volume of poetry shaping up” (62), as he wrote to Laughlin in 1955. Merton’s days were certainly crowded – by his duties at the monastery, his heavy correspondence, and his other art forms. A visit to the Merton Center at Bellarmine University reveals just how many books he wrote in his lifetime – and more books are coming out all the time. Through it all, he wrote poetry, a form which was complemented, I think, by his calligraphy and photography.

Merton was a complex and sometimes contradictory man – a best-selling author who took a vow of poverty; a lover of women who took a vow of chastity. As Lynn Szabo writes in her essay, “‘In the Dark before Dawn’: Thomas Merton’s Mystical Poetics” (24-40), many of the themes and contexts of Merton’s poetry “are synchronously emblematic of his life and art, synthesizing its dichotomies and perplexities: artifice and the genuine; the apparent and the real; truth and falseness; silent monasticism and relentless writerly impulses; asceticism and creativity; contemplation and action; anonymity and renown; silence and words; secularism and mysticism” (25). We must remember that Merton’s conversion to Catholicism (from paganism, he claimed) was smoothed by the poetry of William Blake, the English mystic poet, about whom Merton wrote his master’s thesis. Szabo writes that Merton’s poems “combine the epiphanous spiritual revelations of his monastic vocation with the ordinariness of human life as he knew it within and beyond the monastery walls. That the poems of his early monastic experience often center on its sometimes obscure theological or liturgical contexts is not as significant as their representation of his determination to synthesize in his mystical poetics his spirituality and his lived experience” (25).

This volume also includes articles by Bonnie Thurston on Merton’s poetic language and interreligious dialogue (106-19), Jeffrey Bilbro on Merton’s antipoetry (120-49), Malgorzata Poks on *The Geography of Lograire* (150-69), Deborah Kehoe on Merton’s ecopoetry (170-88) and Susan McCaslin on Merton and poet Denise Levertov (189-203), as well as four previously unpublished poems by Merton (210-19), and an interview (conducted by Paul Wilkes) with the San Francisco poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (220-26). Gray Matthews appends his “2008 Bibliographic Review – The Mystic’s Hope: Thomas Merton’s Contemplative Message to a Distracted World” (227-60). Volumes under review in this issue include Merton’s *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, Patricia A. Burton’s *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton*, Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson’s edited *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton’s Contemplative Message/Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton*, Jim Forest’s *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, William Harmless’s *Mystics*, and Bonnie Thurston’s *The Spiritual Landscape of Mark*.