

over the innocence of a bystander. He matters because he reclaims for us the monastic virtues of hospitality, silence, poverty, stability and life-long conversion; because he teaches us to love all life and “worry about *both* birds and people,” as he put it in his reflections on Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*.⁴ Ultimately, Merton matters because he shows that the Sermon on the Mount still matters.

1. John De Graff, David Wann and Thomas H. Naylor, *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002) 2.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 254 [6/6/1965].
3. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 280-81: “In Silence,” ll. 1, 14-21.
4. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274 [12/11/1962].

Beginning at the End

By J. S. Porter

Whenever someone asks me how he or she might enter into Thomas Merton’s vast body of work, I usually recommend *The Asian Journal*.¹ (I make the suggestion when I know that the inquisitive person is familiar with Michael Mott’s *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*.²) It may seem odd to begin at the end, but I think I can make a playful case for such an unorthodox invitation. I stand with Robert Lax’s assessment that Merton in *The Asian Journal* is “most himself, most keen & observant, witty, lost, (found) erudite, enlightened, clean, natural, free, mature.”³ “[I]n his journals,” says Ross Labrie, “Merton came closest in a verbal medium to the spontaneous self-expression that he achieved in his calligraphies.”⁴

Compiled by his editor Naomi Burton, his private secretary Brother Patrick Hart and his publisher James Laughlin five years after Merton’s death, *The Asian Journal* draws on three separate notebooks: “A” – the public journal intended for publication; “B” – the private journal; and “C” – the pocket notebook. The book also fulfills Merton’s stated ambition recorded on July 17, 1956 to write an inclusive and expansive book: “And I have always wanted to write about everything. . . . a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything.”⁵ Although very different in content, the only book I can think of as being roughly comparable in form is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up*,⁶ compiled by his friend Edmund Wilson in 1945, five years after Fitzgerald’s death. It too is a book of everything – letters, poems, essays and notes.



J. S. Porter

J. S. Porter is a poet and essayist, a columnist for *Dialogue Magazine* and a frequent contributor to the online journal *Hamilton Arts and Letters*. He is the author of *The Thomas Merton Poems* and *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* and is currently at work on a collaborative book with Susan McCaslin entitled *Thomas Merton Superabundantly Alive*.

As in the tradition of the poet Basho, with whom Merton shares a haiku mind (a mind at play with jumps and multiple connections), whatever Merton sees or thinks or feels or even dreams he records. And like Basho, he displays great sensitivity to nature, one of the constants in his life. He is always aware of the weather, how the day is, where the birds and butterflies are. “Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally, in the air, then depart in different directions” (*AJ* 107). Birds and butterflies receive as much comment in *The Asian Journal* as the Buddha statues in Polonnaruwa.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).
3. James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Crossroad, 2006) 207.
4. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1979) 53.
5. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 45.
6. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1945).

Where the Gospel Requires Us to Be

By Christopher Pramuk

In Calcutta just weeks before his death, Thomas Merton famously described the monk, and thus himself, as a “very strange kind of person . . . a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margin of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience.”¹ Some forty years later, Jesuit Fr. Daniel Berrigan took issue with Merton’s self-assessment. “I thought maybe his work, and mine as well, was not to look upon ourselves as at the edge of anything. We were creating a new center. We were where the Gospel required us to be, and the people who were giving in to violence as a Christian assumption, they were the people at the edge, not me.”²

Merton’s “marginal” location and Berrigan’s “new center” are not, I think, two different places, but one vocation of the heart, animated by the dance of freedom and grace in which each of us must discern where the gospel requires us to be. But here’s the catch. Where the gospel requires you to be may not be where the gospel requires *me* to be. Why? God blesses each of us with particular gifts, and a Spirit who blows where it will through conscience and freedom and the wisdom of the community all at once. The call to discernment involves navigating “my place” in response to the Spirit who moves freely in all these realms and beckons diverse gifts into life and being.

How difficult it is to discern the path between conformity and critical dissent! For most of his days Jesus was a faithful Jew and a subject of the



Christopher Pramuk

Christopher Pramuk teaches at Xavier University in Cincinnati and serves on the board of The International Thomas Merton Society. He is the author of the award-winning *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, and most recently of *At Play in Creation: Merton’s Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (2015).