

## Reading Thomas Merton Anew

Review of

*Thomas Merton: Insights and Interviews*

An Anthology Drawn from 35 Years of *The Merton Annual* (1988-2022)

Volume I

*Recoveries and Discoveries in Thomas Merton's Own Words*

Edited by Glenn Amorosia

Introduction by David Odorisio

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2025

xxix + 547 pages / \$25.95 paper; \$39.95 two-volume set

Reviewed by **Bernadette McNary-Zak**

In the introduction to the first issue of *The Merton Annual*, published in 1988, the editors share their intention

to use items in the annual which include art and photography by Merton and also unpublished, or obscurely published, writings by him which will help to further his reputation. We hope to include lectures and papers from Merton symposiums, conferences and commemorations which occur with ever increasing frequency. We also plan to include interviews of persons who knew him, as well as articles which may be speculative in the sense of relating to Merton's work in a concrete, but sometimes, indirect fashion. (ix)

These distinctive hallmark features, present in subsequent volumes of *The Merton Annual*, continue to provide a clear, stable structure for the journal (See Appendix II, "*The Merton Annual* – A Brief History" [538-39]). Two of these features are the focus of a two-volume anthology edited by Glenn Amorosia and introduced by David Odorisio, published by Fons Vitae. Volume I – addressed in this review – showcases select previously "unpublished, or obscurely published, writings" featured in *The Merton Annual*; Volume 2 contains "interviews of persons who knew [Merton]."

The reprinted works in Volume I comprise a cross-section of Merton-authored works representing 35 years of *The Merton Annual* (1988-2022). Glenn Amorosia's prefatory remarks situate the volume, giving attention to the vision as initiated by Victor Kramer, "founding editor of *The Merton Annual* in 1986" (xvii). David Odorisio's introduction contextualizes his own involvement in the project and explains that "The materials collected in Volume One serve as a kind of roving overview

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of Merton's *corpus*, filling in numerous gaps and lacunae" (xviii). Odorisio presents the tri-partite organizational structure of this volume, reviewing its contents by foregrounding editorial work as well as pertinent thematic and contextual markers.

Selected works are neatly organized into three parts. The works in Part One, titled "Pre-Monastic Materials" (1-95), illumine select moments and life experiences before Merton enters the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 13, 1941. "On Remembering Monsieur Delmas" (from vol. 34 [2021]) recalls the classroom of the Lycée Ingres in 1927 where, at the age of twelve, Merton assumes the task of relearning the French language. A different space – the Oakham school – then centers Merton's semi-autobiographical short story, "The Black Sheep" (vol. 11 [1998]). The setting shifts to the cusp of World War II in *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (vol. 5 [1992]), a novel that positions a young man travelling by train to New York where he anticipates a better life. A solo visit to Bob Lax in Olean, NY in June 1938 occasions Merton's "Letters to Pat" (vol. 30 [2017]) and is the location from where he submits his "Application for Conscientious Objector Status" in March 1941 (vol. 28 [2015]). Months later, Merton maps contours and defining features in "Vocations to the Lay Apostolate" (vol. 7 [1994]). Together, in these works Merton processes persistent questions of meaning and value. He grapples with life transitions and relationships, searching for authentic self-identity. Seeds that will burgeon in monastic life are planted.

This is evident in the works contained in Part Two, "Monastic Matters" (97-279), composed at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Merton defines and upholds the contemplative life in the context of the Christian life, drawing on biblical exegesis and the Church Fathers in the opening chapters of "The School of the Spirit" from 1949 (vol. 10 [1997]). Later, as Master of Scholastics (1951-1955), Merton's instruction appears in pamphlets on select topics. "Monastic Courtesy" tackles the ideal of a common life of charity in communion with Christ, attending closely to representative chapters of the *Rule of Benedict* (vol. 12 [1999]). "A Balanced Life of Prayer" (vol. 8 [1995]), addressed to monastic and lay audiences, considers the object – and obstacles – of prayer, the atmosphere of prayer, and contemplative prayer. Extant early chapter drafts of *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) are also situated in this period (vol. 13 [2000]). With a pair of short articles published in the early part of his tenure as Master of Novices (1955-1965) – "The Monk in Sacred Art" (1956) and "Art and Worship" (1959) – Merton posits a theological anthropology in the artistic dimension of human expression (vol. 18 [2005]). He identifies core differences between psychiatry and asceticism, distinguishes normal and neurotic anxiety, describes actions of self-will, and locates the habit of transference in "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life" (vol. 4 [1991]). Two collections of correspondence conclude Part Two. The first collection, "A Quite Exceptional Convent" (vol. 29 [2016]), reveals networks of relationships between Merton and members of the Regina Laudis Benedictine community, including Sister Miriam Benedict, Mother Benedict Duss, Sister David Serna, and Sister Mildred (who refers to Merton as the "Kentucky Titan" [205]). The second collection, letters written between 1964 and 1968 (vol. 32 [2019]), evinces the relationship between Merton and Brother Patrick Hart, grounded in a shared commitment to the monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani. In Part Two, recurring themes are paired with specific concerns related to the monastic life.

The works gathered in Part Three, "Further Perspectives" (281-536), are "organized into three groupings: (1) letters and prayers; (2) transcriptions, including both Merton's monastic conferences at Gethsemani and recordings made for communities of women religious, as well as two conferences

given in India in 1968; and (3) essays and prose pieces arranged chronologically from the mid-1950s to 1968” (xxiii-xxiv). Merton’s external communications are well represented in the first grouping. Included here are the extant letters between Merton and Ad Reinhardt (vol. 18 [2005]), the 1963 correspondence with Thomas Francis Smith (vol. 19 [2006]), the correspondence between Merton and Douglas Steere (vol. 6 [1993]) and the “Three Prayers” for Frank Kacmarcik (vol. 18 [2005]). Merton’s conferences and recordings from the mid-late 1960s are clearly showcased in the second grouping. Featured here are “Some Points from the Birmingham Non-Violence Movement” from 1964 (vol. 25 [2012]); opening remarks preceding “About Contemplative Life Today” (1968) (vol. 16 [2003]); “Aesthetic and Contemplative Experience – James Joyce” (1968) (vol. 27 [2014]); “Comments about the Religious Life Today” (1967) (vol. 14 [2001]); “Prayer and Identity” (vol. 20 [2007]); “He Is Risen” (1967) (vol. 9 [1996]); two conferences given on his Asian trip, “A Conference on Prayer” (1968) and “Toward a Theology of Prayer” (1968) (vol. 31 [2018]). Merton’s involvement and far-reaching coverage of timely topics is signaled further in the third grouping with writings that address devotional renewal: “‘The Pope of the Virgin Mary’ and Other Uncollected Marian Writings” from the 1950s (vol. 33 [2020]); social responsibility: “Christian Perspectives in World Crisis” (vol. 17 [2004]) and “Answers for Herman Lavin Cerda: On War, Technology and the Intellectual” from 1967 (vol. 2 [1989]); and religious worldviews: “Preface to Dom Denys Rutledge’s *In Search of a Yogi*” from 1963 (vol. 23 [2010]) and “The Zen Insight of Shen Hui” in 1968 (vol. 1 [1988]). Part Three provides a coherent complementarity to the “Pre-Monastic Materials” and “Monastic Matters” addressed earlier in the volume.

*The Merton Annual* has become an established academic resource worldwide. This rich and rewarding republication of selected Merton-authored works in a single volume benefits *TMA* and non-*TMA* readers alike. It offers opportunity, in the words of Victor Kramer, for “new insights from the varied firsthand experiences of Merton” (ix) by magnifying the scope of Merton’s life and work. It makes space, as Glenn Amorosia contends, to consider “the evolution of a writer through all the stages of his tragically cut-short life” (x). It broadens access to Merton Studies by upholding the significant scholarly work of contextualizing, editing, transcribing, introducing and commenting. It invites reflection and welcomes response, in David Odorisio’s view: “Like much of Merton’s unpublished work, there is much spiritual wisdom to be gleaned for the patient and dedicated seeker” (xxiv). In gratitude, for this reader it affirms an enduring presence.