Sounding the Depths of Silence

Review of
Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives
By Jane Brox
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019
310 pp. / $27.00 cloth

Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

As I was browsing through the new book display at my local public library, my eyes fixed on a book with a one-word title: *Silence*. With interest piqued, I read the sub-title: *A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives*, and rifled through the pages to find chapters on a penitentiary in Philadelphia, on monasticism and on Thomas Merton. Of course, I wanted to read the book and, now, to recommend it to Merton readers. The book is informative and thought-provoking, at once disturbing and inspiring. Author Jane Brox is an accomplished and widely acclaimed writer and currently a faculty member of Lesley University's Master of Fine Arts Program. *Silence* is her fifth book. *Time* magazine named her previous book, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light*, one of the top ten nonfiction books of 2010.

In *Silence*, Brox deftly draws readers into two different yet not unrelated worlds of silence: one, the imposed silence of the penitentiary, and the other, the elected silence of the monastery. Her juxtaposition of these worlds is illumined and personalized by the stories of two individuals: the unknown Charles Williams, the first prisoner to be incarcerated in the then-new Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, and the celebrated monk-writer Thomas Merton, who lived in the solitude of the Abbey of Gethsemani near Louisville, Kentucky. Moving between these two worlds, Brox divides the book into five parts: I. "Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary, 1829: Experiment in Silence" (3-50); II. "The Monastic World: A History of Silence" (51-112); III. "Philadelphia: Darkening the Dark" (113-70); IV. "The Silence of Women" (171-207); and V. "The Ends of Silence" (209-56). In addition to a Coda (257-64), the book contains Acknowledgments (265-66), a Bibliographic Note identifying sources that Brox found especially helpful (267-70), Notes (271-99), Permissions (300) and an Index (301-10).

In chapter 1, "Man of Sorrows" (1-11), Brox introduces Charles Williams, Eastern State Penitentiary's first prisoner: an eighteen-year-old black farmer who "was sentenced to two years of solitary and silent confinement" for breaking into a house and stealing what amounted to $25: a silver watch, a gold seal and a gold key (8). Brox's description of his initiation illustrates how vividly and effectively she draws readers into the realities of penitentiary life, while offering a

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hint of the comparison to monastic life to come. After he passed through the penitentiary gate, a ritual to prepare him for his cell began. It was almost as elaborate as that required of a postulant entering a monastery. He took off his street clothes, was given a bath and had his hair cut short. He was examined by a physician and his scars were noted. He was issued two handkerchiefs, two pairs of socks, a pair of shoes, trousers, a jacket and a shirt of plain weave. His identity as Prisoner No. 1 would be sewn into his clothing and hung above the entrance to his cell. He was not to be called Charles again for the duration of his stay (see 8-9). While the isolation – no letters, no visits with friends and family, no contact with other prisoners – was meant to be punishment, it "was also meant to alter his soul" (11).

In chapter 2, "Benjamin Rush's Vision" (12-27), Brox explains how the silence and solitude imposed upon Williams and his fellow prisoners came to be seen as an alternative to "the hangings, brandings, and whippings" that marked the treatment of prisoners in England and in the American colonies (12). Public punishments, Rush insisted, made "bad men worse" (26). Rush's insistence on the redemptive character of silence doubtlessly resonated with the value accorded silence by Quakers in Philadelphia and, as Brox points out in the third chapter, "Good by Discipline" (28-38), with calls for prison reform by Englishman John Howard and by Jonas Hanway. "When punishment came, in both England and the colonies, it was public, swift, and physically brutal. For lesser crimes, the convicted could be pilloried, whipped, branded, ducked, or set in stocks in the public square" (14). For crimes punishable by death, public hangings and gibbetted corpses were thought to serve as deterrents. The reform envisioned by Benjamin Rush called for a new structure. In chapter 4, "John Haviland's Star of Solitudes" (39-50), Brox notes that the young British architect Haviland's design for Eastern State Penitentiary was a far departure from the brutality of existing prisons such as Maine State Prison, where "The cells were four-by-eight-foot holes in the ground, which were nine feet deep. The only opening to each cell was a two-foot-square aperture at the top, by which the prisoner descended to his cell on a ladder that was then drawn up. The aperture, covered by iron bars, was always open even in the worst of storms" (40). Haviland took inspiration from new English prisons which were "constructed in an innovative radial design" (41) and from English philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham, whose panopticon advanced the goal of total surveillance of prisoners. Thus, the center of Eastern State Prison was an eight-sided rotunda.

In Part II, "The Monastic World: A History of Silence," Brox contrasts the vision that informed the creation of the Eastern State Penitentiary with that of Christian monasticism. In chapter 5, "In Proportion" (53-68), she highlights several distinctive features of monastic life that set it apart from prison life as Rush envisioned it. From the beginning, community was integral to monastic life: monks' "lives of individual contemplation became quilted with a communal ascetic life" and practice of communal silence (54).

> When I imagine the silence that Charles Williams endured at Eastern State, I imagine its weight – how it must have been almost entirely unchanging and unforgiving, pressing down so completely that it shattered all the smaller silences of the day; and then I imagine the monastery, where both silence and the breaking of it are considered sacred, and the days are interwoven with silences of varying purposes and duration: the silences of single souls

> praying in solitude, reading in solitude, working in solitude; the silences of a community harvesting together in the fields or baking in the kitchen; the silences within the rituals of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Mass, which may be as brief as a handful of heartbeats. (67)

Brox grounds the next chapter, "Speech and Silence" (69-78), in a reflection on the integral relationship of silence and listening in the *Rule* of St. Benedict. Indeed, the *Rule* begins with the admonishment to "Listen carefully." As Brox rightly observes: "To listen fully requires silence. To engage in meaningful conversation requires silence" (70). Distortions of speech such as gossip and grumbling did not escape St. Benedict. Nor did the distortions of silence escape Merton; and Merton's ever deeper valuing of silence enabled him to see, as he said in Asia shortly before his death, "the deepest level of communication is . . . communion" (*Asian Journal* 308).

In chapter 7, "Thomas Merton: Silence and the World" (79-88), Brox offers a reprise of Merton's journey to Gethsemani that serves as an excellent introduction for those new to Merton and an engaging portrait to those already familiar with Merton. The latter group of readers will enjoy, as I did, Brox's fresh and engaging narrative. She zeroes in on several particularly revealing statements from Merton's best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to map "the journey of a citizen of the city becoming a stranger to it" (79), showing how the young man who frequented nightclubs and speakeasies with friends came to orient himself with a new-found faith and soon realized that what he needed was "the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be simplified out under the gaze of God more or less the way a plant spreads out its leaves in the sun" (81; *Seven Storey Mountain* 260). While teaching at St. Bonaventure, he decided to make a retreat at Gethsemani: "Something had opened out, inside me, in the last months, something that required, demanded at least a week in that silence, in that austerity, praying together with other monks in their cold choir" (82; *Seven Storey Mountain* 310). Just a few months later, Merton returned to the silence of Gethsemani – this time to stay. "But he was never destined to be an obscure monk," Brox quips (85). With the publication of the autobiography, "his solitude, became, in its way, very public" (85). The monk-writer would engage in an "extensive correspondence" with prominent writers, thinkers and leaders all over the world. And as he drew deeply from the wellspring of contemplation, he discovered a vocation to speak out to the world he thought he had left behind. Brox ends the chapter with an important insight from *New Seeds of Contemplation*: "the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men" (88). The title of the *New Seeds* chapter in which that statement appears says even more succinctly: "Solitude Is Not Separation."

"Is it any accident that as time has become more regulated, silence has become scarcer?" Brox asks at the very beginning of chapter 8, "Measures of Time" (89-98). She invites readers to imagine an experience of time aligned with the rhythms of the natural world in which sound – especially that of bells – and silence tell stories. In the monastery, bells marked the hours of the divine office, calling monks to communal prayer and, as Merton instructed his novices, to their true identity: bells "are the voice of liberty and joy, calling us to the freedom of the sons of God" (91). The constraints of chronological time and the obsession with productivity and busy-ness

are at odds with life lived contemplatively, as Merton makes abundantly clear in essays such as "Creative Silence." "The contemplative life," as Merton expresses cogently in the *Asian Journal*,

> must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices – beyond routine choice – become manifest. It should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap, stillness, but as "temps vierge" – not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes – and its own presence to itself. One's *own* time. But not dominated by one's own ego and its demands. Hence open to others – *compassionate* time, rooted in the sense of common illusion and in criticism of it. (96; *Asian Journal* 117)

Chapters 9 and 10, "The Voices of the Pages" (99-104) and "The Great Silence" (105-12), focus on two monastic practices: *lectio divina* – divine reading – and keeping silence during the hours of darkness as directed by the *Rule* of St. Benedict. The deliberate pace of *lectio divina* – during which the words of the text are chewed, digested and ruminated – enables one to hear and, one hopes, to embody, the word. Brox brings a depth of meaning to the power of silence in the darkness of night by turning the reader's attention to Merton's "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952" – the poetic prose Epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*. Brox's words about "Fire Watch" evoke the depth of mystery that resonates in Merton's words.

> The limited light intensified smells, sounds, memories; the silence and dark seemed to amplify his ability to register the world. His was a search, and a syntax, as he scanned the cellar, the scullery, the little cloister, the furnace room, the choir novitiate . . . . Most essentially, he moved through registers of his own road to belief. (109-10)

"Fire Watch," Brox explains, "consolidated all the meaning the monastery to him. The long silence of the night was both a reward after the busy day and an intensification of what he had entered the religion for" (110).

Part III, entitled "Philadelphia: Darkening the Dark," begins with a chapter, "Night in Stone" (115-21), that offers a counterpoint to the grand silence of monasticism and Merton's ecstatic experience of the firewatch, described in the previous chapter. While the monk-writer wrote amply about silence and solitude, Charles Williams left no record of his experience. Thus, Brox turns to others who have documented such experiences. Eugenia Ginzburg wrote a memoir documenting what she experienced during her imprisonment under Stalin's Great Purge. Found to be an "enemy of the people" in a trial that lasted a mere seven minutes, Ginzburg was imprisoned in solitary confinement for two years before being sent to forced labor in the Gulag (see 116). The nights were especially horrific. Ginzburg writes: "The silence thickened, became tangible and stifling. Depression attacked not only the mind but the whole body. Even my hair seemed to bristle with despair. I would have done anything to have heard just one sound" (117). Political activist Vera Figner's account of her imprisonment in a solitary cell during the reign of Tsar Alexander II tells of silence and solitude as disorienting and of the "mad dreams" of the night. "Such dreams," Brox observes, "are far beyond any control, as are the inner voices of the

incarcerated, which rise in the small hours, in the unwilling dark, questioning the ends of all the sinister contraptions and innovations dreamed up by the human mind" (120). Even those who choose silence and solitude such as contemporary British writer Sara Maitland, who spent months alone on a remote island in Scotland, testify to the toll such total solitude can take; she wrote: "I could hear the silence itself screaming" (118-19).

Chapter 12, "I Get Up and Hammer My Leather" (122-33), reports that Charles Williams worked in the penitentiary as a shoemaker. The idea of assigning prisoners to work was itself a controversial practice: was work or idleness more effective in bringing about moral reform? In 1821, authorities at Auburn State Prison in New York, the site of the "most notorious" experiment in radical confinement, opted for idleness:

> they ought to be deprived of every enjoyment arising from social or kindred feelings and affections: of all knowledge of each other, the world, and the connections with it. Force them to reflection and let self-tormenting guilt harrow up the tortures of accusing conscience, keener than scorpion stings; until the intensity of their suffering subdues their stubborn spirits, and humbles them to a realizing sense of the enormity of their crimes and their obligation to reform. (124)

Eighteen months later such confinements were stopped by order of the governor. Auburn began "the practice of work in closely guarded silence in communal rooms during the day, and solitude and silence at night, which eventually came to be known as the Auburn system" (125). At Eastern State, prisoners were put to work in their cells. The hope that inmate labor would defray penitentiary costs was not realized. Some likened the penitentiary to the institution of slavery. Brox quotes historian Caleb Smith who writes: "the Northern states were inventing new instruments of unfree labor, new sites of confinement, and new patterns of inequality" (128).

As the title of chapter 13, "Punishment within Punishment" (134-49), suggests, as if the ordinary deprivations of prison life were not enough, other punishments were devised. Inmates could be denied work; food, already meager, could be reduced to bread and water; bedding could be removed; inmates could be denied periods for exercise. Infractions could be met with the punishment cell – the dark cell, the deprivation of all light: "Solitary within solitary" (144); and the use of physical punishments, such as metal gags inserted into the mouth, showed that "these old practices, once loosed on the world, could not be entirely discarded" (148).

In chapter 14, "So That It 'May Uplift'" (150-58), Brox recalls Eugenia Ginzburg writing of the elation she felt when she learned she would be able to borrow books from the prison library. "'Tomorrow at this hour I would have visitors: Tolstoy and Blok, Stendhal and Balzac.' She soon discovered that in the depths of cruelty and constrained by force, reading helped her maintain a sense of hope and a connection to humanity" (150). Furthermore, she found that in prison, she "explored for the first time the inmost meaning of what [she] read" (151). This was, Brox observes, not unlike Merton's experience of "concentration and depth" as a young monk. Benjamin Rush believed that education was essential to citizenship in a democracy and, more pointedly, that "education would decrease the crime rate" (154). Thus some came to believe that reading, particularly reading the Bible, could play a part in promoting moral reform. But unlike

the well-educated Ginzburg, most inmates "who could read were likely, at best, grade school adequate" (156).

In the final chapter of Part III, "Time Again" (159-70), Brox contrasts the marking of time by daily routine and weekly events in the penitentiary with the "rule" of the clock outside its walls. She imagines that inmates would have heard the bells that tolled the passing of hours nearby. Ultimately, however, the measure of time that mattered was one's sentence. Charles Williams was released on October 22, 1831. Again, Brox turns to written accounts, first that of Eugenia Ginzburg and then that of activist and anarchist Alexander Berkman, to aid readers in imagining what release after years of silence and solitude may have felt like. Freed from solitary confinement and being transported with a group of her fellow prisoners to the Gulag, Ginzburg recalls: "None of us stopped talking for a single moment. . . . It was the first time for two years that we had been surrounded by fellow human beings, and every one of us was rejoicing in the sound of her own voice" (166). During their years in prison, they would have heard only a handful of words: "Get up, hot water, walk, washroom, dinner, lights out" (166). Berkman wrote: "It requires an effort to talk. The last year, in the workhouse, I have barely spoken a dozen words; there was always absolute silence" (168). There is no way of knowing what Williams thought: "Charles Williams – age twenty, laborer, shoemaker, able to read – seems to have disappeared into the world and is remembered now because he was sentenced to be forgotten" (170).

Brox devotes the three chapters of Part IV to "The Silence of Women." As she points out in chapter 16, "Silencing Silence" (173-86), the punishment of women in the colonies was as "harsh" as that inflicted on men and, in some circumstances, even more brutal: "Women . . . were hanged, pilloried, whipped, or branded" (174). They were subject to laws, with roots in the English legal system, that were "aimed specifically at muting their voices" (174). Reasons for punishment were arbitrary, for example, gossip or "talking too much or too publicly, or in a tone of voice that seemed grating or nagging" (174). A favored form of punishment was the ducking stool. Journalist and travel writer Anne Newport Boyall was subjected to this public form of humiliation.

As Brox notes at the beginning of chapter 17, "Or Perhaps the Women . . ." (187-95), prevailing attitudes toward women raised a basic question about the efficacy of efforts for their reform: "Was there a place for women in the penitentiary? Punishment was one thing; redemption, another" (187). Even Anne Boyall lamented the depravity of fallen women; and, Brox notes, "when women fell, it was claimed, they took men down with them" (188). There was no provision for separate accommodations for women at Eastern State. In 1831, there were four black women in a population of eighty-three men. The wife of a keeper was "charged with overseeing the women, for which she received no further compensation" (190). It would be five years before there would be women matrons at Eastern State. While, Brox observes, "the treatment of women at least approximated the treatment of men" at Eastern, at New York's Auburn State Prison, women "were viewed as a danger to male prisoners . . . and so were removed from view" and kept in a single crowded room – all thirty of them (193). Brox concludes the chapter with a contemporary update on how women inmates continue to be silenced. She cites the work of Cristina Rathbone, who in 2005 wrote that while "violence is the main concern in a male prison, at Framingham [Massachusetts Correctional Institution] it is the creation of intimacy

that most worries authorities" (195).

In chapter 18, "Monastic Women: More Shadow than Light" (196-207), Brox draws a contrast between monastic communities of women and men: "Their male counterparts lived in a world of shadow and light; they, in a world of more shadow than light" (199). Women were kept in the shadows by strict rules of enclosure: in 1298 Pope Boniface ruled that they remain cloistered – an enclosure reasserted in the sixteenth century by the Council of Trent after the emergence of mendicant orders committed to serve in the communities in which they lived. By way of illustration, Brox contrasts two Cistercian communities in France: Obazine, the men's monastery, and Coyroux, the women's. Though located less than a half a mile away, the "convent stood precariously on the banks of the Coyroux River, in a wild and forbidding environment" on a site which, according to medieval historian Bernadette Barrière, made "any contact with the outside world, even were it only visual" difficult (205). The nuns there were dependent on the monks of Obazine – for food and, of course, for sacramental nourishment. Unlike the Obazine Abbey, Coyroux was not built to last, and it did not. "All that remains . . . are some partial walls of the church, the sole building constructed with lime mortar" (207).

Brox begins Part V, "The Ends of Silence" with a chapter she entitles "Thomas Merton: Questioning Silence" (211-27). "No silence is stable, perhaps especially an enduring commitment to it," she writes (211). This is a thought-provoking point. In what sense did Merton question silence? Certainly he did not doubt its value or its necessity. On the contrary, he continued to hunger for ever deeper silence, ever deeper solitude. At the same time, as Brox shows, Merton wrestled with what silence meant in light of his ever-expanding understanding of his monastic vocation and an urgent call to speak against war and injustice. How could he speak out and do so in ways that were consistent with his commitment as a monk? Put another way, how might he reconcile his responsibilities as monk and writer, as contemplative and peacemaker? Illustrating Merton's desire for silence and solitude with well-chosen passages from his journals, Brox notes how Merton takes refuge and finds delight in the time he was able to spend in the tiny toolshed, which he affectionately named St. Anne's. However, as Brox aptly points out, "Merton knew that the twentieth-century monastery could not be the twelfth, and the contemplative life could not be an escape from the political turmoil in his own country" (215). He also recognized that there were limitations on his work and witness – imposed by the monk's vow of obedience and the writer's subjection to censorship. In 1962, Merton wrote to Jim Forest: "I am being silenced on the subject of war." By then, Merton had produced a flurry of articles and essays and even a book which he was not permitted to publish. Although he took advantage of getting his message out any way he could – mimeographing articles, sending letters and publishing in the small outlets still permitted, he remained obedient. All the while his understanding of solitude deepened and expanded. "Such solitude, he understood, was never for himself alone. He maintained that the solitary, stripped of the help and hindrances of social life and material comfort, 'far from enclosing himself in himself, becomes every man. He dwells in the solitude, the poverty, the indigence of every man'" (221, quoting Merton's "Rain and the Rhinoceros"). There was no escaping the SAC planes from Fort Knox that flew over the monastery grounds and reminded him of the troubled world for which he still bore responsibility. Fittingly, Brox ends the chapter where Merton's life ended – on his Asian journey – which not only was a deeply profound

personal experience but also provided him "an opportunity to expand his own thinking about the contemplative life and how it might be beneficial to a modern, secular society" (224). In what would turn out to be his last talk, Brox recalls that Merton "affirmed the place of the monastic as an outsider," one called to expose the illusions and false claims of the world (227).

Ironically perhaps, chapter 20, "The Monastic World: What Remains" (228-34), is one of the shortest chapters in the book. Of the once more than seven hundred Cistercian monasteries, Brox notes that fewer than two hundred monasteries (I believe the number of Cistercian houses is one hundred and sixty-nine) remain today. In the United States, there are ten Cistercian communities of men and five of women.

"The Penitentiary has mostly slipped its name. We now have prisons, or houses of incarceration, or houses of correction," Brox notes at the outset of chapter 21, "The Prison Cell in Our Time" (235-44). However, while names have changed and today's inmates are subjected to "the chaos of noise" (237) rather than silence, isolation remains a form of punishment within punishment – a "sentence within a sentence." It is estimated that of the U.S. prison population of a million and half individuals there may be as many as 80,000 inmates in solitary confinement at any one time. Brox reports that the use of isolation as punishment increased in the second half of the twentieth century. Her discussion of "spiritual" programs will be of particular interest to Merton readers. The purposes of such programs, Brox notes, are "not only spiritual" but "practical, too: helping the incarcerated to deal with their restlessness and tendency toward violence, and with the crushing circumstances of daily life; helping them to find a way of acceptance – to bear the moment and the years, the crowds and the noise" (242). By way of illustration, Brox shares a story of a young man sentenced to life in prison at the Massachusetts Correctional Facility who took refuge in reading. During one period of solitary confinement, he found Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* hidden under the mattress. This is what Joseph Labriola wrote in an essay that first appeared in the Winter 2014 *Merton Seasonal*: "The book was illegal . . . I could only read it when I was sure the guard was not making a round. . . . I read it, I ate it. I wrote down lines page by page with the nub of a pencil. I shouted out passages to men in other cells through the barred window" (243). Labriola became a member of an International Thomas Merton Society Chapter which John P. Collins established in 2013. It is an understatement to say that encountering Merton and then reading him together, had a profound effect on the inmates and Collins as well. What the inmates experienced far exceeded any hopes Benjamin Rush may have had. Here there is striking evidence that grace abounds. Merton too knew of spiritual shackles. I am reminded of Merton recalling his eighteen-year-old self visiting the Church of St. Peter in Chains in Rome: "Perhaps what was attracting me to that Church was the Apostle himself to whom it is dedicated. And I do not doubt that he was praying earnestly to get me out of my own chains: chains far heavier and more terrible that ever were his" (*Seven Storey Mountain* 111).

In chapter 22, aptly entitled "Intervals of Silence" (245-54), Brox spotlights the persistent human longing for silence and offers some examples of persons who have intentionally sought silence and written about their experiences. One is American author Doris Grumbach, who records her experience and reflects on "its nuances, its demands, its complexities" in *Fifty Days of Solitude*, published in the mid-nineties:

> The absence of other voices compelled me to listen more intently to the inner one. I became aware that the interior voice, so often before stifled or stilled entirely by what I thought others wanted to hear, or what I considered to be socially acceptable, grew gratifyingly louder, more insistent . . . and I became aware that, with nothing to interrupt it, it now commanded my entire attention . . . In this way, living alone in quiet . . . I was apt to hear news of an inner terrain, an endolithic self, resembling the condition of lichens embedded in rock. (247)

Rather than bringing about separation, silence deepened connection: "What others regard as retreat from them or rejection of them is not those things at all but instead a breeding ground for greater friendship, a culture for deeper involvement, eventually, with them" (247). When British writer Patrick Leigh Fermor made his way to a Benedictine abbey in northern France, he was simply seeking a "quiet and cheap" place to write. There he discovered that "the silence began to feel expansive rather oppressive" (249). Intrigued by the monastic way of life, he "would return to St. Wandrille, and he would visit other monasteries – Solesmes, La Trappe, the rock monasteries of Cappadocia, and the ruins of Monte Cassino among them – to record a vanishing way of life" in *A Time to Keep Silence* (251). Brox ends the chapter on a personal note as she writes about her own experience of silence and solitude, some forty years ago, at Squam on Nantucket Island. As she draws the chapter and the book toward its close, she shares her take-away from experience and study: "silence will not present itself unbidden amid the noise of the world. If I want it, I have to make space for it, and there is always a choice to make that space" (253).

The Coda, entitled "In Ruins," brings the story of Eastern State Penitentiary to the present day. In 1913, it was "converted to a congregate system of incarceration and strict silence was no longer formally enforced" (259). Although the penitentiary was renovated, the original plan did not lend itself to reconfiguration. Eastern State closed in 1970 and in 1994, was opened to the public even as "the danger of collapse remained appreciable" (261). In 1996, the World Monument Fund designated Eastern State among the "one hundred most endangered landmarks in the world." The Coda ends on a personal note: as Jane Brox walks through the ruins, she comes upon its restored synagogue and momentarily experiences there "a silence beyond the ruins of silence" – a fitting conclusion to her research and to the book (264).

As the book's sub-title suggests, silence is indeed "one of the least understood elements of our lives." This is something Merton himself recognized and sought to remedy through his writings. One piece in particular comes to mind: a little essay called "Creative Silence" which he wrote in 1968 and which was published posthumously in *The Baptist Student*. Merton begins with an invitation: "Imagine . . . a group of people who, alone or together in a quiet place where no radio, no background music can be heard, simply sit for an hour or a half hour in silence" (*Love and Living* 38). They are not merely trying to get away from it all, Merton explains. They feel themselves called by God to silence, to listening and waiting. What Merton is describing and calling for is a spiritual practice. For Merton, positive silence cannot be imposed; it must be chosen. It requires the free embrace of a practice that moves one beyond a superficial and fragmented existence.

In its own, somewhat curious way, *Silence* contributes to an appreciation of Merton as an iconic cultural embodiment of the call to silence as an essential element of human experience. For some, the book will serve as an introduction to Merton and, hopefully, an invitation to delve into his writings and discover a wisdom that nurtures the human spirit and inspires compassion. Readers already familiar with Merton may find themselves inclined to turn their attention once again to silence and solitude as defining themes throughout Merton's writings – both autobiographical and not – and to recall once again that Merton's contemplative spirituality inspired his witness to justice and peace. Thus, it is seems fitting that the stories of Charles Williams and Eastern State Penitentiary, which Brox juxtaposes with that of Thomas Merton and the monastery, prompt readers to reflect on the injustice inherent in the criminal justice system. The statistics on mass incarceration speak for themselves. With only 5% of the world's population, the United States contains about 25% of the world's prisoners, currently some 2.3 million people. Mass incarceration mirrors and exacerbates already rampant racial and economic injustices. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world and ranks sixth in the number of executions. And behind the statistics are persons – disproportionately people of color – and their families. Like Charles Williams, they are voiceless. At the root of such injustice, as Merton realized and repeatedly pointed out, is a societal propensity to violence. I am grateful to Jane Brox for a book that, whether she exactly intended it to be so or not, exposes some of those obsessions and delusions *and* points a way toward redemption.