

Immersion, Transformation, Openness

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 37

Edited by David Golemboski and Bernadette McNary-Zak

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Reviewed by **Robert Weldon Whalen**

Even at one hundred and ten, Thomas Merton is full of surprises. The appearance of this volume of *The Merton Annual*, as David Golemboski reminds readers in his introduction, coincides with Thomas Merton's one-hundred-tenth birthday, to be followed by the tenth anniversary of Pope Francis's address to the U.S. Congress in which he honored Merton. The treasures included in this volume – the introduction, a Merton talk, seven essays, a bibliographic review, plus nine book reviews – demonstrate that even now, after all these years, Merton remains a person of dialogue, yes, but also a person of dialectics, paradoxes and contradictions. He could well speak with Walt Whitman: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)” (*Song of Myself* l. 51). “Mutability” might be the watchword for this *Annual*. As Ilia Delio writes in her essay, “Merton's Christophany, Teilhard's Challenge and the Second Axial Monk” (29-49), both Teilhard and Merton are a “mutational figures,” that is, complicated figures who, in their present, rediscovered, transformed and reimaged multiple pasts all the better to explore a range of futures.

The 2024 *Merton Annual* begins with David Golemboski's thoughtful introduction, “Immersed, Transformed and Open” (5-10), which provides a concise overview of its contents. Referring to Merton's “mutational” nature, Golemboski writes that a “dialectic of being rooted in a tradition that has formed and transformed, while simultaneously being open to the wide possibilities of other people, practices and perspectives, is central to Merton's continued relevance and appeal” (5). Merton was fully aware of this dialectical quality and its ironic possibilities. With Merton, dialogue and dialectics could easily flow into comedy, wry wit and even stinging satire, all seen, for example, in *The Annual's* first article, “The Present ‘Crisis’ in Monasticism,” a talk Merton gave to Cistercian novice masters on June 17, 1968. He not only gave the talk but talked in his journal about giving the talk. He couldn't help noting the irony of a hermit making a presentation to a small crowd of visitors. He wrote:

OK. But it is another ambiguous situation. Visiting the famous hermit, satisfying one's curiosity as to what he is up to, noticing if there are empty beer cans in the kitchen, etc. And then the inevitable conference, dialogue, maybe a jazz record, to introduce them to Coltrane. That is what my life is becoming here. I cannot be

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completely adjusted to it. But what can I do about it? It would be just as false to say “no” to everybody and just keep to myself as if I possibly could make my own world and live in it without interference by anybody else. That would be even more unrealistic. (11)

The seven essays and the bibliographic review that follow Merton’s talk reflect not only the range and richness of Merton’s imagination, but also, like beer cans in the hermitage, illustrate William Blake’s aphorism that “without contraries there is no progression. Attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). With Merton, the corollary might be, “with contraries . . . there *is* progress.” To progress, what’s needed, this *Annual* suggests, is not some serene Hegelian synthesis but the sparks fired by dialectical collisions.

Ilia Delio’s essay “Merton’s Christophany, Teilhard’s Challenge and the Second Axial Monk” explores the paradoxical relationship between Merton the poet and Teilhard the scientist. Both were priests and members of religious orders, but they belonged to very different generations – Teilhard was thirty-four when Merton was born in 1915 – and they lived dramatically different lives. Teilhard travelled the world; Merton spent much of his life in one place up in the Kentucky hills. Both, though, embraced and simultaneously transformed their shared spiritual traditions and in this sense, they each were part trickster, part wizard – “mutational figures.” Regarding Merton, Delio writes:

Ewert Cousins once described Raimon Panikkar as a “mutational figure,” that is, one who embodies novel spiritual insights, and transforms the tradition from within. The same could be said of Thomas Merton. He was a mutational figure who lived in a dialectical tension with the world – on one hand embracing it, and on the other hand, withdrawn from it. (29-30)

Two essays focus on Merton’s aesthetics: Christopher Pramuk’s “‘A Conscience Burning with Impatience’: Merton and the Art of Apocalyptic Times” (50-63) and Matthew Kubisiak’s “Aesthetics, Contemplation and Zeal: The Function of Religious Art and Experience in *The Seven Storey Mountain*” (64-78). Pramuk argues that Merton’s apocalyptic sensibility saw revelation not as a flight from the chaos of this world, but precisely as an epiphany within that chaos (53). Kubisiak notes in passing that oddly enough Merton was tempted to respond to his profound Fourth and Walnut experience by laughing out loud (65) – yet another example of the surprising juxtapositions so typical of Merton.

The next two essays explore Merton’s fascination with Asian culture: John Marshall’s “Reading in the Dark: *Lectio Divina* and the *Chuang Tzu*” (79-101) and Benjamin Crace’s “The Book of Transformations: Merton and the *I Ching*” (102-18). Both demonstrate that Merton was no passive recipient of Asian wisdom but rather mixed what he learned with images and practices he’d already inherited, not in some simple syncretism but rather in a creative exercise in enthusiastic dialogue. As Crace points out, for example, Merton’s reading of the *I Ching* reflected his love of Asian wisdom, his psychoanalytic concerns and his poetic imagination.

To art and Asia, Megan McDonald Way adds a surprise. In her essay, “Applying Thomas Merton’s Wisdom to the Undergraduate Economics Classroom” (119-37), she argues that Merton,

mystic and poet, even has insights into the “dismal science.” And there is always something new to discover about Merton, as Patrick F. O’Connell explains in his “A Four Storey Tower: The Building of Thomas Merton’s *Babel*” (138-214), in which he discusses Merton’s play, *The Tower of Babel: A Morality*, inspired in part by his contacts with the composer Paul Hindemith. Merton’s creative process, as O’Connell explains, was full of zigs and zags, corrections and modifications – the final *Tower of Babel* was actually the product of “four distinct stages of development, each a coherent work in its own right” (138). In “Recognizing Contexts” (215-23), a thorough bibliographic review for 2023, Bernadette McNary-Zak demonstrates yet again the remarkable breath of Merton’s interests and of people interested in Merton.

The *Annual*’s new book reviews (224-56) continue this theme of dialogue, dialectic, ambiguity, contradiction and irony. Merton is always good for controversy, for example the on-going controversy about his death, discussed in Paul R. Dekar’s review of *Thomas Merton’s Betrayers: The Case against Abbot James Fox and author John Howard Griffin* by Hugh Turley and David Martin (236-39). There always seems to be something new about his biography, as Monica Weis explains in her review of a new book about Merton’s brother John Paul: *Remembering the Forgotten Merton* by William J. Meegan (231-36). Merton, mystic and artist, was also a serious political thinker, as two reviews explain: Eric Martin on *Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism* by Daniel P. Horan (224-26) and Christopher Pramuk on *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights* by Edward Vinski (226-31). There is much more to say too about Merton the spiritual guide, as Patrick F. O’Connell helps locate Merton within modern spirituality in his review of *Modern Mystics: An Introduction* by Bernard McGinn (248-53). Four more reviews in this *Annual* examine facets of Merton’s mysticism: Emma McDonald Kennedy on *A Retreat with Thomas Merton: A Seven-Day Spiritual Journey* by Esther de Waal (239-41); Jose Andujar on *In Search of the Healing Spirit* by Nass Cannon, Jr. (241-43); Kathleen Tarr on *The Healing Path: A Memoir and an Invitation* by James Finley (243-47); and Connie Braun on *Our Heart Are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* by Richard Lischer (254-56).

Healing and wholeness, of course, provide images of spiritual health; John Marshall in his article notes that both *lectio divina* and his reading of Chuang Tzu helped Merton move beyond “duality” (101). Healing, wholeness and non-duality, though, arise within Merton’s “mutability,” his often kaleidoscopic swirl of paradox and contradiction. As this *Annual* demonstrates, these are not flaws to be overcome but energies to be released. In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), Merton writes that “I, for one, completely agree with Herbert Marcuse’s analysis of . . . ‘one-dimensional thinking’” (139). No one could ever accuse Merton of one-dimensionality. There is an Irish proverb that says “the longest way round is the shortest way home,” and as this *Annual* demonstrates, Merton’s journey to home and truth took many a long and winding road. A motto for this *Annual*’s Merton might well be taken from John Donne’s *Satire III*:

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
And what the hill’s suddenness resists, winne so;
Yet strive so, that before age, death’s twilight,
Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.