

Introduction: 'A Certainty of Tread': Grace Unfolded in Thomas Merton's Contemplative Experience and Poetry

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The 3 December 2001 publication of Ross Labrie's *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*¹ marks a genuine watershed in Merton scholarship. In his Preface, Labrie surveys the book's parameters: to fathom the youthful Merton's simultaneous interest in the kinship between romanticism and mysticism; and to explore his subsequent vocation as both a monastic contemplative and a poet. Articles in this year's *Annual* manifest in rich diversity the convergence of maturing scholarship that mirrors Labrie's integrative approach to Merton, contemplative *and* poet. What is all the more remarkable is the fact that none of this volume's articles had to be commissioned or invited; moreover, they do not repeat the familiar interpretations of the inner circle of Merton aficionados. Instead, readers will discover authors with broad interests whose research affords the deeper context in which to interpret and to understand Merton of Gethsemani's gifts.

Thomas Keating's recent book, *The Better Part: Stages of Contemplative Living*,² similarly points to the movement towards contemplative prayer as a response to 'an enormous spiritual hunger in the human family'. This retired Cistercian abbot and founder of 'Contemplative Outreach' returns to the story of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, a favorite New Testament narrative (Lk. 11.38-42) for monastic meditation on action and contemplation. Keating reinterprets the story in light of the knowledge of the three basic energy centers that develop out of the infant's instinctual needs: security and survival; affection and esteem; and power and

1. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.
2. New York: Continuum, 2000.

control. His interpretations of the spiritual development of all three characters in Luke's story reward readers with a liberating analysis of the reflexes that we use to overcompensate or to repress those 'needs'. The resultant refusal to face the dark side of our personality, instructs Keating, precludes an honest perception of the dynamics of our unconscious.³ His association of this damage with original sin yields refreshing insights on the freedom won through the contemplative experience. The Christian journey then becomes 'a series of humiliations of the false self'.⁴

The damage may not have been deliberate, but we develop a home-made (false) self to compensate for the pain of our unfulfilled instinctual needs for security and survival, affection and esteem, and power and control. We can suppress them in the unconscious but the energy itself remains in our bodies. Then all through our lives, unless we undertake the spiritual journey or undergo deep psychotherapy, we remain unaware of the intense power that such energy continues to exert over our actions and in our decision-making processes.⁵

It is at this very juncture that Labrie's study of the American romantics Thoreau and Emerson (and England's William Blake, among others) resonates with Keating's surmise that the vacuum in today's world is the result of Christianity's loss of 'its hold on the masses after the French Revolution and throughout the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century'. In Christianity's place came Science (or Scientism) as a substitute for religion. But two world wars and the Cold War have proved that the loss of a modernist faith in 'unlimited progress' through the techniques of science only exacerbated questions about the meaning of life.⁶ Labrie explores the romantics' quest for a unifying vision that resists the fragmentation of consciousness that accompanies socialized knowledge. This Canadian scholar skillfully interprets Merton's poetry for evidence of the true self's emergence 'apparently immune from technological manipulation'; he insists that in the monk's poetry we discover the true self 'on its highest and most personal and most existential level'.⁷

The fellow Kentucky poet and Merton acquaintance, Wendell Berry (who visited the hermitage and exchanged correspondence with him), recently has claimed this same search for an integrative approach in *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition*.⁸ What links Berry's and Labrie's work is Edward O. Wilson's 1998 book, *Consilience: The*

3. Thomas Keating, *The Better Part*, pp. 71, 16.

4. Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 23.

5. Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 16.

6. Keating, *The Better Part*, p. 72.

7. Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, pp. 72-73.

8. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000.

Unity of Knowledge.⁹ Labrie makes three references to Wilson's interpretation of the nature-technological science gulf as he gauges Merton's critique of Western culture. It appears that Labrie readily adopts Wilson's reconciliation of science, religion and the arts as a paradigm for *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*. Labrie concludes that in his monastic life (by apprehending through solitude and silence) Merton actualized his understanding that consciousness itself is not the spiritual quest, but consciousness must be related back to 'being' in a synthesis of ontology and empiricism.

Wendell Berry proves far more skeptical and suspicious of Wilson's 'consilience'. In the wake of three decades of reading Merton and Berry, I halt when invited to follow Labrie in the embracing of Wilson's conclusions. This in no way diminishes my enthusiasm for *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* or Labrie's exemplary endeavor. In fact, what makes his book a gem is the friendly and intelligent discourse the author invites. Merton himself thrived on such lively exchanges.

Berry begins by acknowledging some scientists' explicit 'dissatisfaction with the dangerous oversimplifications of commercialized science'. His antidote is a re-awakening of human hope by a 'return to our cultural landmarks' in order to 'reorient ourselves'.¹⁰ While Berry admits a 'necessary usefulness' in Science's 'reductionism' – the knowledge of the parts of a thing and how they are joined together, knowing what things do and what they have in common – he quickly points out its overriding limitations in 'abstraction'. When the particular is absorbed in the general (such as statistical averages or 'type'), which has no materiality and exists only as an idea, Berry cautions that the individual creature is lost. In his alarm, Berry alerts us: 'But [Wilson] does not acknowledge that synthesis and integration are merely parts of an explanation, which is invariably less than the thing explained'.¹¹ An example from current biotechnology illustrates Berry's cautionary criticism. He points to cloning of sheep as 'a way to stall the sheep's lineage and make it unimprovable'. This contradicts the farmer's constant effort to breed a better sheep. 'Cloning, besides being a new method of sheep-stealing', claims the poet, 'is only a pathetic attempt to make sheep predictable... [T]he scientist who thinks he has made sheep predictable has only made himself eligible to be outsmarted'.¹² One could today imagine Merton writing to challenge readers with such wisdom.

9. New York: Random House, 1998.

10. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 3.

11. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, pp. 39-40.

12. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p 7.

As a poet, Berry raises the crucial issue of language:

The constructions of language (which is to say the construction of thought) are formed *within* experience, not the other way around. Finally, we live beyond words, as also we live beyond computation and beyond theory. There is no reason whatever to assume that the languages of science are less limited than other languages. Perhaps we should wish that after the process of reduction, scientists would return, not to the processes of synthesis and integration, but to the world of creatureliness and affection, our joy and grief, that precedes and (so far) survives all of our processes.¹³

With a poet's sensibility, he remarks how our language has been 'conditioned by the assumption that our fleshly bodies are machines full of mechanisms, fully compatible with the mechanisms of medicine, industry, and commerce; and that minds are computers fully compatible with electronic technology'. Berry insists that this metaphor 'has evolved through equation to identification', institutionalizing the 'sin of wishing' that life might be 'predictable'.¹⁴

Berry's critique of Harvard biologist Wilson is reminiscent of Merton's essay, 'The Angel and the Machine'.¹⁵ Without hesitation or apology, the Port Royal, Kentucky poet-farmer-conservationist stands opposed to our 'slovenly willingness' during the past two centuries to allow machines 'to prescribe the terms and conditions of the lives of creatures'. He sees a real alternative in refusing to use our 'technological capability' as the benchmark of our economic life. 'We will instead have to measure our economy', Berry asserts, 'by the health of the ecosystems and human communities where we do our work'.¹⁶ In the end, he rejects Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* because of its 'religification and evangelizing of science'. Berry's hope for a peace and unity between science and religion depends upon recognizing 'real differences' and their respective competencies. Berry disclaims Wilson's proposal for reconciliation that would impose on both art and religion 'the method and values of reductive science'. In the poet's perspective, Wilson's resolution 'would prolong the disunity and disintegration it is meant to heal'. Berry finds it dishonest and biased to propose the reconciliation of Heaven and Earth 'by denying the existence of Heaven'.¹⁷

All this, by way of introducing the matrix of issues that the nine authors address in their contributions to our 2002 *Annual*.

13. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 45.

14. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 6.

15. *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring 1997), pp. 3-6.

16. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, p. 54.

17. Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, pp. 19, 98-99.

In keeping with our practice of featuring unpublished or obscurely published Merton material, the *Annual* this year offers 'The Ox Mountain Parable of Meng Tzu', ably introduced by Merton Center Director Paul M. Pearson. The terrorism of 11 September, 2001 and the breakdown of the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians makes this appeal for mercy and compassion especially relevant amid today's spiral of violence.

Jeannine N. Mizingou analyzes the writings of Merton's longtime friend, fellow poet *and* contemplative, Bob Lax, in "'Bringing the Earth to Flower": A Tribute to Robert Lax (1915–2000): Poet, Pilgrim, Prophet'. Readers will find an appreciation of their mutual influence; Mizingou's rendering of Lax's 'Poetics of Unknowing' offers new insights to interpret Merton's work in the context of the Greek poet's 'circus' metaphors and the dynamics of 'grace unfolded'. Her singling out Lax's metaphor for Merton—'a certainty of tread'—unexpectedly rewards the reader. Gray Matthews contributes a compelling analysis of Merton's contemplative wisdom for navigating amid the mass media and a culture of noise in 'The Healing Silence: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Approach to Communication'. This essay integrates the contemplative *and* the poet's ambition for the possibility of genuine 'communion' with others.

Leonard J. Biallas offers a compelling analysis of Merton's appreciation of a Japanese source in 'Merton and Basho: The Narrow Road Home'. Readers will discover a new context in which to interpret Merton's Asian trip; and one can never again read the monk's chapter 'The General Dance'¹⁸ in the same way in the wake of Biallas's study. Canadian Lynne Szabo interprets Merton's late antipoetry as the locus of contemplative irony in "'Hiding the Ace of Freedoms": Discovering the Way(s) of Peace in Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*'. Her analysis of this satire on the debasement of language traces key influences on Merton; this study reveals the contemplative *and* poet concerned with communicating the capacity for peace in the midst of multiple forms of violence.

Claire Hoertz Badaracco's 'The Influence of "Beat" Generation Poetry on the Work of Thomas Merton' complements well Szabo's work by describing *Cables to the Ace* as 'lamentation poetry'. Her analysis of the 1950s Beat poets' 'tone of protest' combines with an appreciation of Objectivist and Imagist poets Charles Wilson and Louis Zukofsky as primary influences on Merton's later poetry. The result is an informed new perspective for Merton readers.

Merton's love for words and meaning flourished in a gift for various languages. Virginia Bear offers a careful analysis on his linguistic abilities

18. Paul Knitter, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

using a definitive scale for measuring language competence. Her essay entitled 'A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton' will assist Merton scholars and other readers to appreciate the importance of that gift. In a related manner, Johan Seynnaeve's 'Language Mixture in a Macaronic Poem of Thomas Merton' interprets the young Merton's poem 'Mens Sana in Corpore Sano'. Seynnaeve's analysis of structure and pattern results in readers being enlightened about the influence of Juvenal and James Joyce on Merton's work, wit and wisdom.

John P. Collins harvests insights and meanings from Merton's appreciation of novelist, essayist and psychiatrist Walker Percy's writings in 'Thomas Merton and Walker Percy: A Connection through Intersections'. Comparing the two contemporaries and Catholic converts, Collins interprets Merton's enthusiasm for *The Moviegoer* as the response of a fellow contemplative recognizing the novelist's spiritual 'search' amid the alienation of a bewildering age of science and technology.

Dialogue was integral to Merton's contemplative goal of outreach and listening to 'the religious Other' and 'the cultural Other'. Allan M. McMillan's 'Thomas Merton's Seven Lessons for Interfaith Dialogue' interprets Merton's reverence for the power of silence, symbol and metaphorical language in an interreligious context. Paul Knitter has described such interreligious dialogue as the new sense of 'mission'¹⁹ in the contemporary Church and McMillan contributes a useful summary of Merton's insights for a more humane, religiously global community.

Victor A. Kramer contributes this year's annual bibliographic essay, with a broad survey of authors who employ Merton in their diverse works. His comments on Ross Labrie's important *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* will be of special interest to readers.

My interview with Brother Paul Quenon – who knew Merton during ten formative years as his Novice Master, Spiritual Director and artist-friend – offers readers a comparatively younger first-person connection than most previous *Annual* interviewees. Since Brother Paul is known by so many outside the monastery, his reflections and recollections about Merton will be of special interest. Because he, like Merton, is also an accomplished poet and photographer, as well as a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani for almost 45 years, Quenon's perspective is unique. And Brother Paul offers a refreshing analysis of the future of monasticism in our troubled world.

Our book reviewers this year each brings special expertise to the task. One of their more admirable qualities is that none is narrowly focused

19. *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). See esp. ch. 7, 'Mission Reaffirmed', pp. 136-64.

upon Merton; their scholarship brings a wider context to an informed and careful reading of the various books I have selected for review. Readers are encouraged to read closely Bradford T. Stull's review of Labrie's *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*. He points to the 'tension' between modernism and postmodernism in this book. I am reminded of the Scholars' Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani a decade ago when the same issue became the focus of our gathering: 'spirituality and postmodernity' and the contents of *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993).²⁰ Lawrence S. Cunningham seemed prescient when he voiced his discovery in reading those pages: '[T]here are still things to learn about the life and activities of Thomas Merton along with a decided feeling that those who find inspiration in him need to "move on" to those topics which he engaged so seriously'. In the same context, Cunningham also pointed out that Merton refused to be stereotyped and ought not be 'enshrine[d] as the final locus of study and reflection'. He concluded by judging that both the authors and editors of *The Merton Annual* 6 'understand that dialectic and desire...to move our reflections to a new level of discourse'.²¹ This year's *Annual* punctuates that very effort.

Only weeks before making page-proof corrections for this volume, Robert Toth, Director of The Thomas Merton Foundation, delivered a copy of an impressive new resource for Merton scholars and general readers. *'About Merton': Secondary Sources 1945-2000; A Bibliographic Workbook* is a 248-page, hefty and impressive publication compiled by Marquita E. Breit, Patricia A. Burton and Paul M. Pearson and published by The Thomas Merton Foundation. The work features books and reviews, articles and essays, theses and dissertations, news stories and interviews, poetry, art and media. These categories make it possible to distinguish the various secondary sources the simplistic dichotomy of 'Works by Merton' and 'Works about Merton' provided in *The Merton Seasonal*. *'About Merton'* is a unique, remarkable tool that includes a 56-page index.

To order copy (the cost is \$40.00), purchase is available on the website www.mertonfoundation.org; or you can write to The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2117 Payne Street, Louisville, KY 40206-2011. The TMF telephone number is (502) 899-1907.

20. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

21. 'A Cornucopia of Merton', *The Merton Seasonal* 19.3 (1994), pp. 25-26.