

Book Reviews

The Merton Annual, Volume 17

Edited by Victor A. Kramer (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae Press, 2004), pp.376, ISBN 1887752773 (pbk) \$19.95 (£13.99)

Some 20 years ago the idea began to germinate of a 'carefully edited and refereed organ for scholarship related to Thomas Merton's accomplishments as monk and artist', and *The Merton Annual* appeared in 1988. Scholars were encouraged 'to examine all aspects of his life and work.... from biography to textual bibliography, from theology to sociology, from close reading to studies of culture'. In his introduction to this latest volume, Victor Kramer, a founding editor, suggests that the breadth of cultural and critical commentary has not been quite as originally envisioned, perhaps because 'Merton readers and commentators remain within a fairly narrow spectrum'.

Yet the stated purpose of the *Annual* - to continue to develop Merton's message for our times, and to provide an outlet for substantial Merton-related scholarship - is as richly fulfilled in this latest collection, as it has been in previous volumes where Merton's work frequently served 'not just as unquestioned influence, but as a catalyst for action and thinking'.

With Volume 18 of *The Merton Annual* now overdue, a review of Volume 17 may seem a little tardy. However, for MJ readers unfamiliar with the *Annual*,

this is as good a place as any to begin. Volume 17 ushers in a new cycle with a 'broader sense of inclusion of more persons involved in its writing and editing' (p.9), namely four new editorial contributors supported by the ITMS publication committee. The new publisher is Fons Vitae, a press committed to contributing to mutual understanding and respect among religious communities 'by sharing matters of spiritual sustenance', whose *Merton and Sufism*, *Merton and Hesychasm* and *Merton and Judaism* will be reviewed in our next edition.

To mark this transitional edition, we have Patricia Burton's skilfully-arranged 55-page index to the first 16 volumes of the *Annual*. Burton's name may be less familiar to some for her bibliographical work than for her recent editing of and introduction to Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (reviewed in MJ XII.2). Her essay here on the history and composition of the 'Forbidden Book' enriches our appreciation of its place and meaning in Merton's life and the historical context of 1960s America.

A substantial section comprises ten articles which could indeed, as Kramer suggests, have formed a small but significant book in themselves. Introduced by guest editor, Lynn Szabo, who recently edited the selection *In The Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (also reviewed in MJ XII.2), these essays originated at the 8th General Meeting of

the ITMS held in Vancouver in June 2003 with the theme, 'The Hawk's Dream: Thomas Merton's Sacred Landscapes'.

Four of these 'Vancouver Essays' deal in comparative literati and the poetics of place. Deborah Kehoe explores three of Merton's early poems in relation to his thoughts on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, with emphasis on the places of Gethsemani and Little Gidding. Then Angus Stuart traces Merton's journey to Northern California and Alaska with Jack Kerouac as Merton's counterpoint (see Stuart's related article in this Journal). Gray Matthew's penetrating study of the parallel insights and lives of Merton and Henry Bugbee inspires us to open up (if we haven't already) Bugbee's *The Inward Morning* (1958). Ron Dart also builds a bridge, between Merton and his Canadian contemporary George Grant, who 'created a storm in the Canadian academic world in 1951 [when] he argued that modern and academic philosophy had lost its contemplative dimension' (p.124).

In Edward Kaplan's deft hands, the familiar theme of Merton's growing attentiveness to femininity is traced in relation to his progressive receptiveness to Judaism, his 'latent ambition to be a true Jew under [his] Catholic skin'. Inter-religious considerations continue as Patrick Bludworth reflects on Merton's understanding of the institution of the guru, the necessity and value of 'the living presence, from generation to generation, of a specific quality and type of teacher-student relationship... in fostering individual spiritual development' (p.166). Bludworth takes us to Polonnaruwa,

from where Joseph Raab delves into Merton's use of Sanskrit terms in *The Asian Journal* and thereby describes how Merton's contemplative Catholicism undergirded his ability 'to correlate meanings within a new linguistic frame of reference' (as Szabo neatly summarises). David Leigh examines Merton's use of fire imagery in *The Sign of Jonas* as representations of his 'major struggles during this period' (p.153).

Particularly fascinating is a contribution by Kenelm Burrige, the anthropologist whose book, *Mambu: A Melanesian Millennium* (1960), prompted Merton to write his essay on cargo cults of the South Pacific (*Love and Living*. New York: FSG, 1979). To round off this section, Paul Dekar identifies ethical criteria in Merton's evaluations of technology which – despite the unprecedented technological advances of the past 40 or 50 years – arguably remain valid guides.

The collection is finely rounded off with David Belcastro's analytical review which repays the careful attention it encourages. More than a bibliographical review, this essay could describe the value of the Annual itself. Belcastro recalls George Steiner who in *Real Presences* (1989) argued 'that transcendent reality grounds all genuine art and human communication', with the implication that authentic art, in echoing the original act of creation, may lead a person to the source of creation:

Rather than a critical examination of a work that intentionally distances itself

in order to view the work objectively, Steiner proposes a creative response that approaches a work with the intention of creating from it a new work that is simultaneously analytical and imaginative. His proposal is based on a belief that each 'performance of a dramatic text or musical score is a critique in the most vital sense of the term; it is an act of penetrative response which makes sense sensible'.... A creative response 'makes sense sensible' by carrying out the 'potentialities of meaning' of the original work into a new work so that we once again may experience with all our senses and thereby more fully understand what was then and there but is here and now revealed anew. (p.257)

This *Annual* is a rich store of such creative responses to the work of Thomas Merton, not only illuminating his original work but revealing something new in the dialogue which Merton continues to generate amongst those 'readers who eventually get around to arranging their dislocated reflections on texts to which they feel compelled to respond' (p.258). Perhaps, as Kramer has said, published Merton commentators do fall 'within a fairly narrow spectrum', yet the skilled and responsible engagement with his writing, demonstrated through the best of *The Merton Annual*, reveals that fruitful work remains to be done.

Perhaps George Kilcourse was correct when he proposed that now is the time for Merton scholarship to 'try out [its] place in the forum that is less insular, more genuinely catholic' (TMA 16 (2003) 271). Is it possible that this fine vehicle for 'Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns' might yet become that more deeply catholic forum?

Gary P. Hall

The ITMS is now offering The Merton Annual as part of an enhanced membership package.

Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise, photographs by Harry L. Hinkle, essay by Monica Weis SSJ (University Press of Kentucky, 2005), pp.157, ISBN 08131234888 (hbk) \$29.95

This is a wonderful book. As Jonathan Montaldo says in his introduction, it is 'a beautiful book with many windows'. Primarily, the reader is offered windows into the piece of land in Nelson County, Kentucky, which in 1848 became home to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. The photographs of Harry Hinkle capture the beauty and the stillness of the rolling hills, the abbey, the surrounding fields and lakes, as well as the roads, paths and outbuildings around the monastery grounds. Alongside these there is a selection of Merton's own photographs, reminding us through this window as to how he himself responded with a camera to the landscape of Gethsemani. Interwoven with the photography, and quotations from Merton's writings, is