

Yet Merton is also presented to us in this book as a critic of the seductive illusion of the adult self and the often flawed adult judgements we make, which are opposed to real childlikeness. Gardner intricately merges the concept of the child mind to Merton's understanding of an awakening to the true self: who we really are beyond the shadow and the disguise, the mask and persona we present to the world. It is the effort of keeping the shadow repressed and the disguise maintained that contributes to our separation from the spirit of the child and from God. Knowing more about ourselves can lead to moving closer to knowing and loving God. St. Augustine famously prayed that to know myself is to know God.

In this book Fiona Gardner successfully and skillfully fuses often complex psychological and spiritual concepts, making them accessible and illuminating for the reader and enriching our spiritual experience. She opens up the challenges and promises of this journey with conviction, sincerity and warmth, inviting us to believe that the sheer joy of attaining the child's mind truly *is* the only mind worth having.

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Selected Essays

Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

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In his introduction O'Connell quotes Merton from 1961: 'People are now convinced that I secrete articles like perspiration. This is clearly more my fault than theirs, and something has to be done about it.' However it seems that his efforts were useless: he published on average eighteen essays a year over the last decade of his life, and his total output comes in at around two hundred and fifty. The thirty-three essays published here are presented in chronological order from the first in 1950 – his beautiful contribution to a book of conversion accounts – to the last in 1968 – his review of Arasteh's *Final Integration*. The great majority come from the 1960s with only four earlier. O'Connell gives the guiding principles for his choice: to represent the full range of subjects and the different voices that

Merton uses within the overall aim of illustrating Merton's 'sapiential perspective' and his sense of the 'hidden wholeness' of all reality.

Like all students of the humanities from the nineteenth century until today, Merton will have measured out his school and university life in essays. The form represents the paradigm of liberal thought where the process of weighing up different points of view is balanced whilst allowing some freedom for the author to put forward their own preference in the last paragraphs. I'm sure we all remember it well. It is an awkward form for the free spirit and pushes the student towards an urbane, conventional and slightly detached style, forever balancing points of view without there being any sense that the points of view might be all at one end of the scale. Beyond student use, the essay still remains, of course, the basic format for numerous magazine and journal articles as general thought-pieces or as reviews, and once again it often offers the illusion of surveying a scene from an objective view point. This collection shows Merton's ease (from long practice) with the form, but it also shows a progression from the less adventurous early ones to making something more out of the form by allowing his unique access to the anarchic spirit of God to invade and in places to take over the pages.

The essay form is not, some will think, where Merton writes best and at his most immediate and intimate. That would be in the journals and letters where he is free of the formal constraints of writing to an unknown public, and free of the awareness, inevitable with writing essays and articles, of the internalised critics embedded within us from our educational experiences. Thus other readers may, like me, have felt daunted by over four hundred pages of essays. I got round this in a petty revolt against the chronological order of presentation by starting to read the essays from the last one but soon abandoned this to follow up different themes. But whatever the approach (and the reader will do best to take this book in slowly and not all at once), it will assuredly be a rewarding experience, where most Mertonians will be surprised to find new pieces and pleased to re-encounter the well known ones.

The group that startled me most when read together were those on monasticism, contemplation and solitude. What was startling was that these are so relevant to the impossibilities of our Christian life today as lived in an atomised and identity obsessed world where the Church as one's home and community is, speaking personally, often not wholly satisfactory. Merton's experience in the monastery was of course quite

different to the struggling Christian in the world as his essay 'The monastic renewal' shows – a barely controlled critique, both angry and compassionate, of his experiences and that of the many searchers drawn to monasticism in the 1940s and 1950s. But everything he writes about the desire for an intense relationship with God is very relevant to us outside the monastery gates. Perhaps the best gift of the monastic essays is their revelation of what can happen in a focused religious life – a revelation that is as powerful as those from the great periods of Christian experience such as can be found in the writings of Teresa of Avila. Merton opens the door to what is always there and is available to all in these terrific essays.

Another intriguing group of essays are his book reviews. The first in this book is on Pasternak – a text that the Cistercian Abbot General initially turned down on the grounds that novels were 'worldly things'. Others (published without trouble) are on subjects that show how Merton so clearly knew what the world's issues were before the world did. So the Pasternak piece confronts the difficult terrain of political fidelity and commitment to causes; the piece on Ishi, the last surviving Yana Indian who ended as a caretaker in Berkeley's anthropology department, confronts the heartbreaking loss of peoples and languages; the thoughts on wild places in a review of a book about wilderness confronts our destructive taming of the world; and lastly reviews of novels by Camus and Faulkner confront deep modern ontological despair.

And then there are the well known pieces 'Rain and the rhinoceros', 'The time of the end is the time of no room' and 'Day of a stranger' where Merton gets free of the shackles of the form and allows something new to appear – a kind of polemical writing that takes on and confronts, in these instances, the insanity of a world of peace that is assured by nuclear weapons and accepted by convention and habit, and shakes the whole thing down. Here it is interesting to see the essay form fall apart and reassemble itself, for it is precisely the rational, evenly balanced, common sense views, presented by so much contemporary political essay writing, that guide the powerful into unreason, unbalance and nonsense.

Peter Ellis was one of the editors of the Society's recent *Universal Vision*, and has contributed papers to previous TMS conferences. He is now exploring Merton's response to the French existentialist intellectuals of the 1940s to 1960s.'