

the definitive paradox to which the Transfiguration points: taking up the cross that leads to eternal life.

Peter Eberle, OSB
Mount Angel Abbey, Saint Benedict, OR
peter.eberle@mtangel.edu

Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: Insights and Interviews: An Anthology Drawn from 35 Years of The Merton Annual (1988–2022): Volume I: Insights: Essays and Works by Thomas Merton*, ed. Glenn Amorosia (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2025), pp. 547, \$25.95, paperback, ISBN 978-1887752-824.

THE MERTON ANNUAL, now in its thirty-eighth year, is the major publication of the International Thomas Merton Society. Each volume, published uninterruptedly though by different publishers since 1988, has offered the Merton enthusiast scholarly reflections on the life and thought of the monk of Gethsemani. One of its aims has been to also present, for the first time, heretofore unpublished material by Merton himself. It was Victor Kramer, one of *The Merton Annual's* founding editors, who originally had the idea of collecting these Merton writings into one two-volume work. He believed that having such a handy collection would offer something new to the Merton *corpus*. Judging from the first volume alone, Kramer's confidence may have been slightly inflated. Both volumes are edited by Glenn Amorosia, a friend of Victor Kramer and fellow member of the Atlanta Thomas Merton Reading Group. The first volume gathers the various writings of Merton. The second volume will focus on the transcriptions of the interviews with Merton that appeared in the *Annual*.

In the first volume Amorosia organizes the material into three parts: Part One — Pre-Monastic Materials; Part Two — Monastic Matters; Part Three — Further Perspectives. After a Preface by Amorosia himself, the volume begins with an Introduction by Merton scholar David M. Odorisio. The volume closes with two appendices: the first locates each of the book's selections in the particular volume of *The Merton An-*

nual where it was originally published; the second is a brief history of *The Merton Annual*. A helpful index is included.

Odorisio does a fine job with his Introduction situating the material to follow and offers a brief overview of its contents, touching on each of the three parts. This approach will be particularly helpful to those readers less familiar with *The Merton Annual* or who may be novices in the world of Merton writings (though I suspect that most who pick up this book will be avid enthusiasts).

There are six selections in Part One — Pre-Monastic Materials. The highlights of this part are two works of early fiction that Merton references in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when he and his childhood friends “were all furiously writing novels.” “The Black Sheep” is undated but according to Paul Pearson was written probably in 1930. It is Merton’s semi-autobiographical memoir of his life at Oakham School. This is followed by “The Man in a Sycamore Tree: A Fragment of an Early Novel,” about which Merton’s editor Naomi Burton Stone reflects, “It is my recollection that *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, which was a wild and wonderful story, often extremely funny, also had in it a strong autobiographical streak. Unfortunately it was presumably one of the three finished novels that he [Merton] himself destroyed before entering the Abbey of Gethsemani” (35). Each of these works allows the reader to get a glimpse into the early preoccupations of Merton’s budding, creative mind and to better understand the literary foundations upon which he would continue to build throughout the course of his life. Also of note in Part One is Merton’s “Application for Conscientious Objector Status — March 1941.” This is a valuable early source that demonstrates Merton’s long-lasting prophetic intuitions, something which would blossom into full bloom during the final decade of his life.

Eight selections make up Part Two — Monastic Matters. “The School of the Spirit” and “A Balanced Life of Prayer” are both examples of Merton’s early efforts at expressing himself from the ground of his inner life of prayer and contemplation, which would quickly evolve into the great works that would follow the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Each of these selections expresses a Christocentric spirituality that is firmly rooted in the Christian monastic tradition. Two short works that are coupled here, written in 1956 and 1959 respectively, deal with Merton’s interest in sacred

art and its role in the life of Christian worship. These themes, which appear prominently elsewhere in Merton's writings, validate Merton's vision of the monastic life as a type of artistic life where creative, prophetic intuitions are given expression manifesting God's glory through a keen contemplative perception and a life of embodied praise. Also of note in Part Two is "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life," which as Master of Novices Merton wrote to serve as an aid to those monks in his charge and, perhaps, to better understand himself and his own psychological makeup. Brother Patrick Hart wrote of this work in his Editor's Note, "Apart from its historical value for biographers, it sheds light on Merton's own psychological makeup and reflects some of his difficulties in the monastic life" (175). The dominating theme in Merton's exploration here is the persistent presence of neurotic anxiety that can cripple the life of the maturing monk and how it can lead to the creation of a false self and the entrapment in a life of "self-will," which Merton defines as "the power by which the neurotic religious clings in desperation to his idealized image of himself" (186).

By far the longest part, with sixteen selections, Part Three — Further Perspectives, exposes the reader to a variety of Merton themes that occupied his mind and heart during his mature years: modern art and aestheticism; prayer, both eastern and western, Christian and non-Christian; non-violence and social action. The hidden gem of this part, and probably the most significant contribution of the entire volume, is the selection, "Answers for Hernan Lavin Cerda: On War, Technology and the Intellectual." Here Merton is at his most integrated and realized self and expresses himself with clarity and force. In July of 1967, Hernan Lavin Cerda wrote to Merton with a list of questions. Merton's responses were first published in Spanish in the 15 September issue of *Punto Final*, then posthumously published in English in *The Merton Annual 2* (1989) as Merton originally wrote them in August of 1967. As Brother Patrick Hart expresses in his Editor's Note, "They [Merton's responses] are strangely relevant to our contemporary scene today, over twenty years after they were written. They reflect, once again, Merton's views of modern warfare and the problems resulting from a highly technological society, especially as they are experienced by the intellectual, the poet and the artist of the twentieth century" (508–09). In a rare moment of self-disclosure, Merton, before answering the seven questions posed to him, expresses his stance and beliefs in a section en-

titled, “Biographical Data.” He identifies himself as one born of “artist parents” who is “also an artist.” He is an “author of many books” who entered monastic life because “for me monastic life is fundamentally a life of protest and iconoclasm” (510). He continues, “And now living as a hermit, solitary in the forest, but am in contact with groups of poets, radicals, pacifists, hippies, artists, etc., in all parts of the world. Though I believe I have an obligation to nonconformist criticism and independence, I also recognize that my political views are limited and without authority, especially in matters concerning countries distant from where I am” (510). He concludes by confirming, “My position is non-dogmatic, existentialist, Christian in a completely non-conformist evangelical sense, and in many ways my views approximate closely to the humanism of someone like Albert Camus, except that a ground of mysticism and eschatology sharply distinguish me from his religious positions. Yet I would say that in many ways I am closer to him than to rigidly doctrinaire Christians whose Christianity is chiefly a celebration of bourgeois ‘Christian’ culture and the status quo” (510). Merton’s answers, each in turn, reflect this prophetic, non-conformist, monastic consciousness.

At 547 pages, this first hefty volume of the obscure, previously unpublished, writings of Merton is not for the novice Merton reader. It is, though, an ideal work for the Merton specialist. I, personally, wish that I had had this volume available to me when I was researching for my doctoral dissertation, instead of having to skim through the over thirty volumes of *The Merton Annual*, some of which are out of print and are very difficult to locate. But we must give a cautious and qualified affirmative to Kramer’s initial hope that this collection would offer something new to the Merton *corpus*. Little is new and much reiterative. Its value lies mainly in its functionality—the convenience in having Merton’s previously unpublished works in one volume that is thoughtfully organized and occasionally illuminating.

Ephrem Arcement

Holy Cross Monastery / West Park, NY
coruscate68@gmail.com