

# Book Review

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*Reviewed by David Scott*

**Y**ou cannot get far in a book dedicated to poetry for the academic audience without stumbling across the word 'poetics'. Aristotle wrote a substantial treatise on the Poetics, and the collection of essays in this Annual is very much dependent on that word. Much of the material here would be understood by Aristotle but probably not instantly accessible to the general public today. Poetry has become difficult. Well, perhaps not poetry, so much as 'poetics', which is the study of how poetry works. All the contributors who have made up this Annual have absorbed the code; have ingested the 'The University'. Of course, Merton had as well. He was no ploughboy poet. The result of this shift of emphasis from poetry to poetics is that we have not only to come to terms with the words on the page of the poetry book, or pamphlet, nor even just to read it; we have to learn the language of how it gets to being as it is. Why did Merton write like that, and not like

this? What was going on inside him, and what was he experiencing at the time that he wrote, let's say, 'Cables to the Ace'.

How many times have I looked into 'Cables' and come away blurred. The first essay in this edition of the Merton Annual, by Michael Higgins, brings daylight in just the right amounts. His article is a poem in itself. Perhaps it is because I related to the poet-priest bit at the beginning, or because Higgins takes some of the poems that I first entered into myself; and what a good title 'The Priestly Imagination', and then to dive into the deep end with 'Cables to the Ace'. Just to show you how thick I am, I have spent years wondering what sort of cables Merton was talking about, not to mention the 'Ace'. I think I'm now looking at messages sent across through cables. Yes?

Lyn Szabo opens her essay, 'In the Dark before Dawn; Thomas Merton's Mystical Poetics' with an explanation of the 'Elegy for a Trappist'. It is about the collapse of an elderly monk in the garden of the monastery, a place he loved much. The poem was written shortly after the funeral of the monk, and the germ of the poem arose from Merton noticing that on the day of the funeral, 'a big truck with lights moving like a battle cruiser toward the monastery gate', was going past the monk's 'abandoned and silent garden'. Szabo helps us see the shape of the poem,

its poetics, and so allows us to enter into Merton's method, his delight at getting the experience correctly onto the page.

Ross Labrie actually titles his essay 'Merton's Mystical Poetics'. One of Merton's poems, which he goes into in some detail, is 'The Geography of Lograire'. It is a small book-length poem, and is increasingly taking centre stage in the Merton canon. It is a very personal work, profoundly elliptic, even coded. Labrie relishes, as much as Merton did himself, connecting the unconscious with the underlying meaning of life.

Malgorzata Poks has made a study of these 'difficult' works of Merton's. She seems to relish the complexities, helping us to place them in Merton's poetics. This is seen particularly in Lograire, the title of her essay being, 'The Geography of Lograire as Merton's Gestus': gestus, prolegomena (Greek), introduction (English). There seems to come a time when one particular poem takes centre stage. The scholars seem to move in on it. Its time has come. Could it be that the very complexity of it invites research, and/or it moves us away for a time from the obviously 'monastic' poems; much loved and well-known, but here is new ground, new treasure. 'Lograire' is tough stuff. Merton's brain is working on a wide canvas, and yet allowing him, and us, to enter many of his passions, and much of the psychological complexity of a fascinating twentieth century explorer.

Rather than seeing the poem as a straightforward means of communicating thoughts and experiences, Poks explains: 'the refusal of the closure characteristic of the new exploratory poetics, employed in his two book-long prose poems, "Cables to the Ace" and "The Geography of Lo-

graire", seemed more consonant with the new reality governed by Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle'. The whole idea of poetry as something straightforward to read and enjoy, is being eclipsed 'by problematizing the relationship between the word...the concept it names...and the world the signified refers to...words neither imitate nor express reality, but shape consciousness and perception: it is not man that speaks language but language that speaks man, as Heidegger famously claimed in his 1950 essay, "Language"'. For the non-specialist this can be quite disheartening. You go to the section of 'Lograire', which deals with Merton's disastrous months at Cambridge, and the poet is elusive almost to extinction: 'Found in the act. Seeming Letters and postals of/George in the milky sun. Millways. King of the/post bus. Comes with a Gainsborough and puts a pillar box/under the tree. I have drops in my eyes and can't see the/pictures. Stunsun Newmarket morning is wide all/over.' (Lograire, p.56, no.37, I Queens Tunnel)

The poetics seem to have completely overrun the formal concept of poetry, as previous generations did before Merton: see, for example, T.S. Eliot and Wilfred Owen for the shock of modernism. Merton's poetic style shifted quite significantly away from an intense monastic preoccupation in the sixties. He was obviously in touch with the poetry scene worldwide. James Laughlin, at New Directions, no doubt wanted to cater for the growing desire for looser, less obviously 'religious' verse. It was the era of the beats. Merton took to the air, poetically speaking, by finding religious material from a large variety of cultures to weave

his new poetics. What we often limply call 'other religions', Merton took to heart in a global way, and found energy and the written recourses to make poetry out of what could easily have been seen as dull stuff.

Bonnie Thurston takes this period on for us in her essay, 'A Ray of that Truth which Enlightens All', and she says this about Merton's new found 'zeitgeist',

If poetry in Merton's day is to be a force for good, it must avoid facile 'empty talk' and arise from a silence that has listened profoundly to all levels of current reality. Poetry must scrupulously avoid what Merton called semi-religious verbiage and pieties... put positively such poetry must be fresh and innovative in form and expression.

Thurston gets to celebrate Merton's expansive, miraculous entry into the world of faith beyond Christianity, and embraces it in his writing and in his sisters and brothers of deep spirituality across time, and through the world. Again, 'The Geography of Lograire' provides the canvas on which Merton's fascination for the mysticism of religions, and his engaging with the proponents of them: with Rabbis, Muslims, Zen Buddhists, Chinese religious scholars, and many others. As Pat O'Connell puts it, 'Inter-religious dialogue is at the heart of Merton's contemplative alternative to cross-cultural misunderstanding, or to a soulless "global" culture dedicated to efficiency, pragmatism and profits'.

If I understand Geoffrey Bilbro aright, he is particularly interested in the nature

of language, and in how Merton confronts realities that seem too big for poetry, and the use of language that breaks down in the face of global disaster. Some of Merton's later poems seem hardly to deserve the name of poem. That is, the formal time-honoured structures, sonnet, sestet, heroic couplet can no longer do what they did of old. Poetry needed to become prose in order to become poetry again, to say what poetry would have said before. Take a 'poem' like 'Original Child Bomb' (1962), about the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The task of writing about that cataclysmic event, and holding its meaning in a sonnet has defeated modern poets. Merton turns to irony, and news-speak. Bilbro explains this for us: 'The title The Original Child Bomb fuses innocent-sounding, crudely literal translations of the Japanese description of the atom bomb'. As the poem develops, Merton focuses on the religious words used in government language about the bomb: the test explosion was named 'Trinity'; those who saw it quoted the Bible to express their belief in its power. The bomb itself was called 'Boy'. So the poetry uses an irony, which in a way has been given unwittingly by the perpetrators of mass destruction. The irony tells a chilling tale, a story, which simply would not fit into the language of the past.

As the strain of reviewing begins to tell, it is a great comfort to breathe the eco-friendly air of Deborah Kehoe's contribution. I never thought Merton looked after himself very well. In fact I got the impression that he did not look after Brother Ass at all well, and so the eco-label that Kehoe awards must come largely from Merton's writing, and some fresh insights. Kehoe also writes very well, and reads

widely in the area of poetry: Thich Nhat Hanh, Louise Gluck, Chuang Tzu, William Wordsworth, Robert Lax; all adding to her article on Thomas Merton's 'Ecopoetry: Bearing Witness to the Unity of Creation'. The article has a positive, joyous air about it, catching Merton's great laugh in the climate of hope for the planet. Just as a personal aside, and to reward those who have read so far, one of the books Kehoe did not quote, not surprisingly, is my own *Merton Cook Book*. Four copies were printed. I have one, and Esther de Waal, Jim Forest, and Tommie O'Callaghan have the others. It is not very long at all.

Susan McCaslin continues the poetic strain with a deeper look into the poetry of Denise Levertov. Levertov was born into a Jewish family in London. Her father converted to Christianity and became an Anglican priest. McCaslin reflects on the similarities between Levertov and Merton. Both had, 'family heritages that inspired their creativity; both poets set lyrical poems of deep interiority in their collections beside more engaged political poems. Both artists also explored throughout their lives a mystical contemplative spirituality'. Readers will not be unaware of Merton's dream of the figure of Proverb, the young Jewish girl, who in the dream embraced Merton, 'so that,' writes Merton, 'I was moved to the depths of my soul'. This essay takes a singularly beautiful subject, and it makes a fitting conclusion to the essay section of the Annual.

The riches keep falling from heaven. We then have an introduction and critique of 'Four Unpublished Poems' by Merton: 'A Remark on a Situation' (unfinished); 'Derelict'; 'True Love's

Novice', 1943; and 'Visit to Louisville', October 1948. The poems are also printed. I can't wait to get on with those.

However, there is one final section and that is books. The 2008 Bibliographic Review, 'The Mystic's Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message to a Distracted World', is written by Gray Matthews. It includes, with particular interest for the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, a short critique of the papers from the last Merton Conference. They were written and delivered by Fr. Jim Connor, Bonnie Thurston, and myself. There is nothing like reading reviews to keep one's humility in order.

David Scott has recently retired to the Lake District.

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**ALSO NOTED:**

*Seeking Paradise—The Spirit of the Shakers* by Thomas Merton, edited with an introduction by Paul M. Pearson, has recently been re-issued in paperback by Orbis, price £12.99. Kathleen Deignan, reviewing the book in *The Merton Journal* in 2005 (Vol. 12.1), said, 'Few have matched Merton's astonishing insight and eloquence about the spirit of the Shakers, and these essays...surpass most of what has ever been written on this remarkable society of American mystics'.

*Editor*