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The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton by Monica Weis,
SSJ (review)

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Christianity & Literature, Volume 62, Number 2, Winter 2013, pp. 313-316
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton. By Monica Weis, SSJ. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8131-3004-0. Pp. xv + 197. \$40.00.

The publication of this new entrance to Thomas Merton studies comes at a most prescient moment in the swelling wave of ecocriticism, environmental criticism, and “green theory” in literary studies. A comprehensive study of Merton’s passionate, ever-expanding ecological conscience and subsequent environmental vision, this volume joins Weis’ earlier collaboration on and exploration of Merton’s life as a Trappist monk and nature lover (*Thomas Merton’s Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise*, 2005) in providing its readers with robust research and well-grounded argumentation for Merton’s sacramental cosmology. The accompanying notes, bibliography, and index make this volume a Merton researcher’s necessity. In its six chapters, Weis surveys the germination, gestation, and birthing of a vision that was gaining maturity, wisdom and prophetic force in many of Merton’s writings before his untimely death. She concludes that “had Merton lived beyond December 1968, he probably would have written a series of cutting-edge essays on ecojustice to complement his profound, visionary statements on social justice” (154).

Weis has chosen to make Merton’s letter to Rachel Carson in response to his reading of *Silent Spring* (1962) the springboard for this exploration of Merton’s environmental vision. Asserting that Carson’s book is “[w]idely regarded as the most influential book in the last fifty years” (12), Weis finds in his letter that “he is sensing in Carson a kindred spirit” with whom he shares “profound insight into our responsibility for the Earth” (13). This strategy allows Weis to center the letter as the nexus that empowers and directs the energy of her explorations and argumentations, persuading readers of her claims and challenging them to join the mission. Indeed, Merton’s impassioned letter seems an appropriate choice for the focal point of Weis’ investigations; almost overwhelmed by the apocalyptic dimensions of our human destructiveness, he comes as close as he ever does to turning on his own species, calling our irresponsibility toward our own culture and environment an illness (“I almost said mental illness,” he notes)—“a dreadful hatred of life” (qtd. in Weis 13).

It is only as Weis unpacks the factors leading Merton to such a conclusion that the reader comes to understand how fully Merton’s own life was foregrounded and formed for such a moment as this pivotal letter pronounces. In each of the ensuing chapters, Weis begins by discussing the themes that she will explore therein; she then offers intensely researched evidence to support her contentions. As such, this book becomes an extended conversation with a plethora of correspondents, poems, journal entries, essays, books, reading notes, and critics seated at the reader’s table. Fr. James Conner, OCSO, Abbey of Gethsemani, makes the initial introductions, reiterating the invitation and its coming rewards: “Thomas Merton can show us the way to return to the original stance regarding creation. Monica Weis can help us discover ... the way that we can imitate him in this conversion of heart” (xii).

In her opening chapter, "Encountering Rachel Carson," Weis observes that Merton's reading of *Silent Spring* is of the same order as his famous epiphany in 1958 when, in Louisville's business district (on one of his earlier and rarer forays from the abbey), he has a sudden, cosmic realization that he is "intimately connected" to all other human beings. This moment is credited as the conception of his "turning toward the world" from his radical place of solitude, silence, and contemplation that his subsequent writings demonstrate in their wide-ranging concerns with war and peace, the ills of consumerism, and inter-religious dialogue. In tandem, Merton's response to Carson's book is to decry the *hubris* that motivates our destruction of the environment and call for the humility to reject such pride in order to reclaim an "interdependent vision" of life. Weis' case is compellingly made since his letter to Carson is his first public declaration about "nonviolence to the environment" (19). From this point onward, Merton's commitment to individual contemplation would include his embrace of the "deep longing for belonging" (*ecopoesis* as Jonathan Bate names it; 20) that encompasses all of the natural world and its beings.

If one were to select a single outstanding chapter from the book, I would recommend the second, "Learning to See," for its overview of Merton's aesthetics and their heritage as well as the discussions of place and its centrality to both his exterior and interior geographies. Building on concepts of wakefulness in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity, as well as the literary influences of William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the American Transcendentalists, Weis traces the awakening of Merton's inner eye by which he realized both intuition and practice as the force of place—what nature writer Barry Lopez means when he claims "that geography or place is not a 'subject' but a shaping force on imagination" (28). Tracing the influences of Merton's birthplace, Prades, France, his boyhood in St. Antonin and Murat, and his formational experiences in Rome and New York City, Weis demonstrates the significant effects of each on his understanding of landscape during the period of his novitiate at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941. Merton writes in his journal of that period, *Entering the Silence* (1996), that for him "landscape seems to be important for contemplation" and that he "has no scruples about loving it" (215-16). Following on the abbot's permission for Merton to walk and pray in the forests outside of Gethsemani's enclosure (June 27, 1949), Merton's expanded sense of place brings the recognition that in the wildness of nature "the Presence of God invades him" (328). One sees that Merton's aesthetics here foreshadow what became his sacramental poetics and incarnational environmental vision. The delightful selections of photographs from Merton's boyhood (also recounted in his mother's documentations, *Tom's Book*, 2005) from his father's paintings are visual cues for these same effects (although how much more so had the latter been printed in color).

Calling on her previous work on Merton and Wordsworth, Weis engages the Wordsworthian notion of "spots of time" set forth in Book 12 of *The Prelude: Growth of the Poet's Mind* (1850 edition): "There are in our existence spots of

time, / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue..." (ll. 208-10). Conflating this concept with the Greek concept of *kairos* time, Weis claims several of such moments in Merton's life as "so transforming they become right-angled occurrences that redirect the path of life" (50). She also offers us valuable manuscript studies demonstrating how Merton reconfigured and edited his telling of these "intense, intimate explosions of [his] awareness" (49) and alerting us to his increasing intention to understand and recapture them in words. They include his first experience of Gethsemani during Holy Week of 1941, eight months before he relocates there for good, as well as his approach to the great *buddhas* of Polonnaruwa. To these she adds instances less known to Merton readers and in so doing, offers us new ground to tread, making this chapter of special interest. In explicating these accounts of transformational moments found in his writings, Weis deduces and concludes that Merton is able to grasp and offer these insights because, of course, he is a writer and grace-infused contemplative, but to this she adds that for Merton, "just as surely, nature plays a part in the revelation of divine secrets" (63) and that our creation as human beings is "itself a vocation to union with God" (65). With evidence from *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), and selected poems at hand, Weis determines with integrity that Merton's call to join in the "general dance" of creation and stewardship (*homo faber*) is rooted in his commitment to an incarnational theology rooted in the "holiness of matter" and the "Pantokrator (all-powerful One) ... desiring union with humanity (65).

"Seeing Differently," the fourth chapter of this volume, offers a collective of observations about Merton's responses to nature's elements and their appearance in his writings as records, incantations, metaphor, and, ultimately, spiritual direction. Such a catalogue will serve students well as they attempt to comprehend his oneness with nature in terms of rhetoric, literature, and monasticism. Pointing to the daily-repeated offices of the *horarium*, Weis begins an argument that, similar to that of Mircea Eliade's (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 1958), accounts for ritual as the foregrounding of the convergence of transcendence and immanence (68). In such a definition, Merton's constant revels in nature form the architectonics of a poetics that aspires to the unity in all things. By means of his "poetic eye," Merton has the capacity to perceive and represent this cosmology in extended metaphors drawn from his outer geography in order to imply his inner journey as an inveterate traveler. Even the weather becomes his classroom, inciting in him a listening attendance vital to his integration of monasticism and his ecological consciousness.

Extending this framework to his prayer, poetry, and photography is the undertaking of the penultimate chapter in Weis' laudable and initiating overview of the environmental vision of Thomas Merton. She calls upon Merton's own definition of contemplation, "that it is the highest expressions of [one's] intellectual and spiritual life," (*New Seeds of Contemplation* 1), as the ground of her explication of these three genres so intertwined in Merton's aesthetic consciousness. Weis

goes further to assert that they are “convincing evidence of [the] ongoing transformation of his ‘True Self’” (94). In this process, these prayerful arts become the expression of the arousal of his personal commitment to “ecological justice” (125). Nature becomes for Merton not only a place to pray, write, or see, but the “means to holiness” which offers him that “place” wherein his vow of stability is kept regardless of his geographical proximity to the abbey walls. Here, Weis offers a new and profound insight about Merton’s “merging of inner and outer landscapes” (121).

This eco-verse finds its centrality in the theological premise of the Incarnation, the “Jesus-Resurrection” (106), and the evolving and conscious awareness that the world itself is “a transparent manifestation of the love of God” (*Witness to Freedom* [1994] 71). Merton’s overwhelming sense of living in these profound mercies is recounted in an illustrious contemplation of poetry, essays, journal entries and photographs. Weis does readers and researchers a fine service by taking the time to explicate many of the emblematic expressions of these genres, although I covet additional insights from her own perceptions (such as the explorations of the motif of the deer in Merton’s writings offered in the stand-alone essay of her “Afterword”). As she draws together her studies of the forms that Merton’s poetry, prayer, and photography have taken, Weis concludes that “a kind of literary trajectory of his thinking and praying” allows us to “understand why reading Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* is a pivotal moment in his evolving consciousness” (124).

From this vantage, we are readily able to follow Weis’ concluding chapter into the repletion of her thesis and its arguments in *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*. Returning to his letter to Carson, both the key artifact and premise of her study, Weis reminds us of the three aspects of Merton’s “deepening spirituality”: the “sacramentality” of nature; human “kinship and harmony” with nature; the compassion and responsibility that the Spirit of God arouses in all who share in the awareness of such. The roles that his reading and correspondence play in assisting his experience are clear in Weis’ recapitulation of her understandings about the “watershed” moment created by Merton’s reading of *Silent Spring*. His role as public intellectual plays itself out in his subsequent writings on the environment, his membership in “The Wilderness Society”, and the integration of his “vision” into the commitments of his larger influence as a poet, peacemaker, and monastic prophet.

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