

## Seeing into the Life of Things

Review of

*The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*

By Monica Weis, SSJ

Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011

184 pages / \$40 cloth

Reviewed by **Deborah Kehoe**

Many readers of the *Merton Seasonal* will know that *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* is not Monica Weis' first exploration of Merton's evolving relationship with nature. For approximately two decades, Weis has consistently produced essays centering on this powerful piece of Merton's compelling complexity, and her substantial publication record provides this new book with a wealthy reserve of accumulated knowledge from which to draw.

While a knowledgeable authorial presence presumably lends strength to any study, Weis' voice offers not only scholarly authority, it also communicates her respect for Merton's intense interaction with the natural world and his grasp of the intricate and delicate web which holds all living beings. Furthermore, her writing inspires readers to a greater awareness of the deep spiritual significance of humanity's connection with nature, a quality which Fr. James Conner notes in the book's Foreword: "In this book Monica Weis shows us something of Merton's own inner life in relation to creation. . . . She does this in such a way as to demonstrate that this is important not only for Merton and his own development, but for each one of us as we likewise strive to take part in the dance of creation" (ix).

As indicated in the book's title, chapter headings, and author's introductory essay, the study seeks primarily to show that although Merton was interested in nature almost all of his life, his ability to truly *see* the natural world evolved through a process of awakening. Weis effectively organizes her work to show this progression. The six chapters that comprise the book provide proof of Merton's lifelong sensitivity to place; describe key revelatory experiences involving nature throughout his life; and illustrate, largely by referring to his journals, his maturing need to synthesize such experiences into art and prayer. The first and last chapters focus on Merton's emerging ecological consciousness, illustrated most emphatically by his affirmative response to the work of Rachel Carson and his willingness to join forces with those in society working for eco-justice and responsible stewardship of the earth. By framing her analysis with evidence of Merton's prophetic environmental awareness and efforts, Weis gives the book an added

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dimension of contemporary relevance. To use a serviceable expression, this book deals with a hot topic; therefore, it has the potential to appeal to a wider audience than that of Merton enthusiasts alone.

The book displays its author's own remarkable vision as well. As a veteran academic, Weis has obviously developed the organizing skills of the successful teacher. Aware of the vast quantity of material on her subject and the impracticality of trying to mention everything applicable to her purpose, Weis navigates the reader's course through the book with effectively-placed road maps consisting of lists of focal points, laying out for the reader patterns in the matter under discussion. A study that might otherwise be nebulous is rendered specific and coherent under her deft handling. To offer but one example: in Chapter 4, "Seeing Differently," a chapter which Weis labels "central to the book" (5), the author uses passages from Merton's journals to demonstrate the growth of his relationship with nature, a challenging enterprise given the multiple volumes of those journals and the frequent notations concerning the natural landscape in which Merton spent much of his time. To facilitate the task, Weis establishes four "overlapping clusters" into which passages from Merton's journals can be placed for purposes of better perceiving his evolving environmental vision: those that reflect his "poetic eye" as he observes his surroundings; those that contain "extended metaphors" used to capture the mysteries contained in what he sees; those that give "weather reports" on both the outer and inner climate of his daily existence; those that merge the "inner and outer landscapes" of his locale into expressions of contemplative prayer (72).

Weis' literary expertise further enriches this study. For instance, in her discussion of the shaping experiences of Merton's life, she employs the term "spots of time," a phrase coined by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, to refer to certain graced and ultimately therapeutic interactions between humanity and nature wherein the individual comes to a deeper understanding of life, "sees into the life of things," as the poet writes in his poem "Tintern Abbey." The Wordsworthian references throughout the book are particularly apt because of Merton's identification, albeit a conflicted one, with the famous Romantic poet sometimes referred to as the "Priest of Nature." Readers familiar with Wordsworth's poetic reflections on nature's spiritual gifts have a helpful point of comparison with which to apprehend more fully the depth of Merton's relationship with creation.

While the merits of *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* are numerous, the weaknesses are few. And maybe *omission* is the more appropriate word to use than *weakness* to identify the one cause for reservation I had upon finishing the book. I refer to page 152 where Weis impressively caps her discussion of Merton's cutting-edge embrace of ecological activism by listing specific abuses of the environment which persist in our world today, in spite of past and present eloquent calls for more conscientious "creation care," issues which continue to demand a heightened awareness of the sanctity of nature which Merton developed years ago. The list includes such items as offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, among other controversial actions wrought by the human objectification of nature in the interest of economic gain. Upon reaching the end of the list, however, I felt a certain let-down which I expressed

in the margin, “nothing about factory farming?” Then, after recollecting myself, one whose passionate opposition to this unnatural industry borders on obsession, I thought it would be unreasonable to elevate to the status of fault a single oversight and decided not to mention it.

That is, until the author did it for me. In the Spring 2011 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, in the article “The Prophetic Merton – Once Again,” Weis tells of seeing for the first time in the Merton Center in October of 2010, a statement written by Merton in reply to a request from Scotland to contribute to a manifesto against industrial farming. The statement, catalogued but hitherto unpublished by the Merton Center, “emerged” among materials gathered for a display on Merton’s nature writings. Startled by this finding, Weis writes of the document, “How had it happened that I had not included it in my new book that traces Merton’s growing awareness of ecological responsibility?” (11). A tenacious scholar, she goes on to make an expeditious adjustment by using Merton’s inspired condemnation of factory farming as an additional example of the monk’s extraordinary ecological and compassionate conscience. Thus she offers an intellectually and personally gratifying follow-up, abundant compensation for an earlier, understandable omission.

And so much for any misgivings I could have of such a masterful book, sure to be a rock-solid point of departure for further forays into this very important topic.