



# THE MERTON ANNUAL

Studies in Culture, Spirituality and Social Concerns

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Edited by

Deborah Pope Kehoe    Joseph Quinn Raab



THE MERTON ANNUAL  
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*THE MERTON ANNUAL* publishes articles about Thomas Merton and about related matters of major concern to his life and work. Its purpose is to enhance Merton's reputation as a writer and monk, to continue to develop his message for our times, and to provide a regular outlet for substantial Merton-related scholarship. *THE MERTON ANNUAL* includes as regular features reviews, review-essays, a bibliographic survey, interviews, and first appearances of unpublished or obscurely published Merton materials, photographs and art. Essays about related literary and spiritual matters will also be considered. Manuscripts and books for review may be sent to the editors.

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awareness of common pitfalls when inviting students into the patient stillness of listening to the heart in silence, but the manuscript lacks the depth and richness of supporting scholarship that would offer insight and guidance beyond pedagogical situations. One of the greatest strengths of *Three Breaths and Begin* is that Meyer offers multiple helpful script-guides that lay a strong foundation for starting points for teachers interested in introducing guided meditation into their classroom environment, which can help lead students to a deeper encounter of their authentic self. As Meyer stated: “Meditation doesn’t create something that isn’t there, but it often will bring to the surface what has been hidden away” (73).

Thomas Malewitz

KERR, Aaron K., *Encounters in Thought: Beyond Instrumental Reason* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), pp. 135. ISBN: 978-1532639173 (paper) \$20.00.

Aaron Kerr’s new monograph asks the question: how can we rouse ourselves from the mental torpor induced by technology and instrumental reason? As Kerr sees it, “if we do not interrogate our technological culture we remain distracted in digital patterns of consumerism” (xi). The central chapters of the book each outline a single mental process that can free us from our unreflective state, followed by a discussion of an exemplar of said process, and finally an everyday depiction of it. Thomas Merton exemplifies *openness* and is used throughout the book as a figure capable of encounters in thought. He is an iconoclast against the backdrop of our preoccupied culture whose lead we should follow. The book is theoretically rich and practically useful as a guide to renewed practices of thinking.

Kerr spends the first chapter delineating the problematic of modern technology and instrumental reason with appeal to Albert Borgmann’s *device paradigm*. Technological convenience – and increasingly the internet and screens – alienate us from the true experience of things. Things become transposed from what they are into data for our consumption (hence the emphasis on instrumental reason). Kerr then offers two case studies of high school teachers who have combated the grasp of technology on youth. One theology teacher uses exercises of silence to interrupt digital reliance. A biology teacher uses field trips into nature. Both create a reflexivity that students need in order to recognize their ordinary void of thinking. The pedagogical examples Kerr provides are instructive of Kerr’s purposes: one use for the book is to help academic teachers reflect on their practices.

The second chapter creatively borrows from infant psychology to describe how to hone the intellectual virtue of *openness*. Openness



requires not some *tabula rasa*, but an anticipation of patterns and the ability to creatively engage with those patterns. “Openness . . . depends upon the dynamic relation between pattern and variability. . . . This work takes encounter seriously, since, in order to be able to sift the intellectual germinations of these experiences, we search out new encounters to test and nourish them” (25). Thomas Merton exemplified openness in his intellectual and personal life, including borrowing wisdom from atheist existentialists, and even falling in love platonically. Kerr argues that the structures of monastic life, rather than stifling openness, created a solitude and pattern that could be creatively appropriated by Merton.

The third chapter focuses on *wonder*, contrasting this mental experience with the experience of technological wonders like the iPhone. Such wonders captivate us only to stunt our true engagement with reality surrounding us. True wonder stimulates us with a genuine alterity that invites us to engagement. Eva Saulitis – marine biologist and poet – is the exemplar here. Saulitis’ captivation with sea creatures drew out both her emotional and her analytic engagement.

Chapter four contains some intricate discussions of thought processes involved in the characteristic of *receptivity*. Despite the additional complexity, the analysis of receptivity is some of the richest in the book. Kerr provides a fourfold look at receptivity. Receptivity covers “our experience of thinking,” “thinking about our experience,” “perceptual/reception of teacher/other,” and “reception of idea/concept” (59). All are fruitful topics. For example, the “experience of thinking” describes the experience of asking a question, where we encounter our own ignorance of some topic, our partial knowledge relating to it, as well as a social experience of recognizing one another’s thought (see 61). The exemplar of receptivity is Malcolm X, who was creatively receptive to his own social context of black oppression while simultaneously being receptive to the egalitarian vision of Islam (see 78).

The fifth chapter discusses the culmination of these virtues in contemplation. Contemplation is a “slow entrance into a more unified moment of awareness resulting in a focus on ultimacy” (88). In contemplation we gain new perspective on the patterns that enthrall us, allowing some idea to transform and reorder thinking. At its heights, it is a focus on ultimate concerns, even welcoming a sacred dimension in thought that allows us to escape our own false sense of mastery. Anselm of Canterbury is used as a paragon of contemplation. Kerr offers a corrective of the logic-chopping way that Anselm’s ontological argument has been used in philosophy, suggesting that one of its functions in meditating on that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-conceived is that it induces wonder at brushing

against the ineffable ultimate. It is apophysis.

In his discussion of contemplation, Kerr again references Merton as a figure who thought with the sacred dimension. Kerr could have also referenced how Merton welcomed the uncomfortable realization of our finitude in his thinking. Kerr thinks an honest acceptance of human frailty and limit is a necessary stage in contemplation, and from Kerr's own discussion of Merton in chapter 2, we know Merton had such recognition.

One commonality among several of the exemplars – Merton, Anselm and Malcolm X – is that their highly structured lives carved space for deep thinking. Kerr's observation here does perhaps open a further question on a practical level about the role social context plays in contemplation. While Kerr suggests that these monastic rigors are not needed for people to reengage in thought – and surely he is right in many cases – we might wonder whether Kerr's own practical suggestions for thoughtful engagement lack the power of a monastic structure. Kerr discusses deep reading, ecological encounter, good teaching practices, but at times does rely on our own “willfull intentionality” in contemplation that falls short of the inducement of the monastic structure (111). So, while Kerr offers several suggestions for practices that move us toward deep thinking, and instructive descriptions of the workings of encounters in thought at a theoretical level, his own analysis points to a role for renewed contexts for more people to engage in deep encounters in thought. He emphasizes a moral pull toward contemplation, but this may necessarily require political and social shift.

The final chapter provides a philosophical meditation on water that demonstrates the kind of thinking Kerr calls for throughout. The book is written in a relaxed style that makes at least the early chapters accessible to highly educated adults, not just academics. In its accessibility and social diagnosis, it is reminiscent of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987)<sup>1</sup> or Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity*.<sup>2</sup> The complexity of some later chapters requires more philosophical familiarity, despite continuing the themes from the early chapters. Perhaps the most receptive readers would be those academics in need of refreshing themselves and their teaching against the inertia of modern suppression of authentic thinking.

Tom Crosby

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

2. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).