

call to contemplation is weighted toward the social dimensions of his later work. Those intent on the interior journey may not find enough of Merton's exquisite writings on the interior life to satisfy their unending thirst.

Still, that very aspect is one of the strengths of Bochen's work. For Bochen has written a text that is accessible to those for whom interiority is less inviting, a population that includes many young adults and those primarily interested in the implications of Merton's work for social justice. The second group of selections, 'A Call to Compassion', focuses directly on his social thought as he examines the committed Christian's response to the Holocaust, the anti-war movement, racism and colonialism. Beginning with the well-known 1958 epiphany in Louisville, Bochen charts a course through Merton's transforming vision, his developing sense of personal mission and his prayer for peace delivered to the US House of Representatives on 12 April 1962.

A 'Call to Unity' is the third section of Merton's writings, and here Bochen incorporates some of Merton's views on the Second Vatican Council, inter-religious writings, and ecumenical pleas. In the course of the book, her selections demonstrate how Merton's voice and vision moved in ever larger circles—from the privacy of his personal conversion and his early days in the monastery, expansion through his personal commitment to social justice, to a player and participant in the world arena. Wisely, Bochen closes with an Easter homily Merton wrote in the last years of his life, 'He is Risen'. Merton's compassion rings through the piece. His words may have lost some of their political precociousness or surprise value over the years, but the core of his message still rings true. We have been called to share in the Resurrection, Merton reminds us in this final piece, 'not because we are religious heroes, but because we are suffering and struggling human beings, sinners fighting for our lives, prisoners fighting for freedom, rebels taking up spiritual weapons against the powers that degrade and insult our human dignity...' (p. 190).

The knowledge Bochen gained from editing Merton's work is evident in this volume, and among her strengths is her ability to incorporate so many different types of Merton's writing—journals, letters, poems, essays, introductions to foreign editions, excerpts from familiar and much loved books, as well as homilies and prayers. The book could be used as an excellent introduction to Merton or as a primer on Christianity and social justice. A word of caution is appropriate however, for true aficionados of Merton's writing. Those who have already invested significant time in a deep understanding of Merton's life and engaged with him as a kind of literary spiritual director (including, I suspect, many readers of this publication) may find Bochen's *Essential Writings* leaves them somewhat unsatisfied, hungering for the greater depth that can only be found through engagement with complete works, one that necessarily moves beyond just the essential.

Lynn Bridgers

WALDRON, Robert, *Poetry As Prayer: Thomas Merton* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000), pp. 169. ISBN 0-8198-5919-2 (paperback). \$8.95.

Thomas Merton's work and metaphysical visions of the divine-human relationship are obvious pairings. Such metaphysical visions are apparent in much of

Merton's thought and writing as well as in writings about him. Robert Waldron's *Poetry As Prayer: Thomas Merton*—the second volume in Pauline Book's Poetry As Prayer Series—is no exception. Waldron claims that reading poetry can help to elicit and sustain spiritual formation and transformation. Like Merton, Waldron is inviting his readers to begin or continue their contemplative journey via poetry.

Waldron's interpretation of three of Merton's poems ('Elias—Variations on a Theme', 'Night-Flowering Cactus', and 'Stranger') implicitly reveals the personal and relational model of both human nature and God that Merton seemed to live by for most, if not all, of his life. Waldron's meditative commentaries on these poems illustrate how Merton's love for writing fueled his relentless quest for a relational ontology. Within this poetic 'way of being', one catches a glimpse of Merton's dynamic relationship with virtually everyone and everything with which he interacted (e.g. poetry).

Etienne Gilson's book, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, was a revolutionary read for Merton.¹ Gilson challenged Merton's understanding of God as *a* Being by presenting God as Being *itself*. Consequently, Merton rarely, if ever, approached God as an idea or concept but rather as a personal presence—the basic foundation to living a contemplative life. Because Merton's journey is in fact from a contemplative perspective. Asserting nothing to 'know' about Being, poetry serves as a more capable means of penetrating his ontological explorations than, say, philosophy or science.

I.A. Richards' classic, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, explains the 'interanimation of words'² or how words in a sentence affect one another in meaning and context. Thus, there is a mutual dependence of words regardless of the discourse in which they find themselves. However, the degree to which words depend on one another for meaning depends on their discourse. In the discourse of poetry, Richards suggests, words do not necessarily depend on one another for meaning. He thus states, 'We know very much less about the behavior of words...[in some forms of poetry]—when their virtue is to have no fixed or settled meaning separable from those of the other words they occur with. There are many more possibilities here than the theory of language has yet tried to think out.'³ Perhaps Merton was intuitively aware of the 'many more possibilities' of poetry despite his uncertainty as to whether writing in general should be a part of his monastic vocation. And perhaps such perception is one reason Merton continued to seek a place for his gift of writing within his call to the contemplative life. Merton's attempts at articulating how writing poetry could exist alongside his strict and rigorous monastic calling are seen in his third book of poetry, *Figures for an Apocalypse*. There, as Waldron notes, Merton asks the question, 'Are poetry and contemplation compatible?' (p. 48). Of course, Merton eventually discerned that his poetic talents were divine gifts which led him into a deeper relationship with God. He proceeded to write more and more.

1. See Thomas Merton's, *The Seven Story Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948), pp. 172-73.

2. I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 47-66.

3. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, p. 48.

Waldron notes the artist, Paul Klee, who once said, 'Art does not reproduce what we see: it *makes* us see' (p. 49). Likewise, Merton believed that poetry also *makes* us see. Here, Waldron clarifies how poetry opens our eyes: 'Poetry calls each of us to be a 'new [person]'. We are created anew each time we enter into a careful reading of a poem' (p. 50). Waldron further points out that in *Bread in the Wilderness*, Merton recommends that everyone read the Psalms because of their theological impact (p. 48). Upon this recommendation, Merton had already spent 12 years reciting the Psalms daily. So, perhaps he regarded poetry as a boundless reservoir of divine wisdom because of the transformative effects it had on him. Moreover, there is additional evidence for assuming that poetry opened Merton to new and revolutionary experiences since he describes it as 'The flowering of ordinary possibilities...the fulfillment of all the momentous predictions hidden in everyday life'.⁴

Like Merton, Waldron believes that meditating on poetry will lead one to God. There are, of course, certain theological assumptions about the nature of God in such a statement. This rather subjective and ambiguous claim may not ring true for some. But for Waldron, reading (and writing) poetry as a technique of prayer *is* an effective way to become more aware of the Sacred and Holy.

Possibly the most appealing aspect of Waldron's claim that reading poetry can help to elicit and sustain spiritual formation and transformation is his sober attention to the risks and responsibilities of pursuing contemplative ways of reading poetry. For example, he states:

We all contain within us the beauty of the Imago Dei (Image of God). It is this beauty which attracts us to Beauty itself, and makes us pursue it and attempt to recreate it. Thus, when we read poetry, we must approach it in humility. We must be willing to enter an unknown territory, a sacred ground that will allow us to be touched, astonished, and again to experience wonder. But to experience the light of Beauty, we must cast aside all that is false, we must be stripped of all that is selfish (pp. 53-54).

Waldron's statement is emblematic of Merton's own journey; a journey which required him to perpetually sculpt his theology according to the dynamism of his intellectual and spiritual growth. (After all, there are vast theological and philosophical differences between the pious Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the Zen-conscious Merton of the late-1960s.) Yet despite such changes, Merton remained focused on his task as a monk. And he did so in many ways: his life as monk, poet, priest, social critic, spiritual master, and even Zen-Buddhist proponent, demonstrate his manifold approach to 'living in Christ'. Sure, each role created tension for another, but each also assisted Merton with what he considered his primary task as a monk—to fully embrace the solitary life. In helping clear the ambiguity of such a task, Merton states in his *Disputed Questions* that a solitary is 'one who is called to make one of the most terrible decisions possible to [oneself]: the decision to disagree completely with those who imagine that the call to diversion and self-deception is the voice of truth and who can summon the full

4. Patrick Hart (ed.), *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 373.

authority of their own prejudice'.⁵ So within this task, there lies a clear need to, at some point, 'let go'. This elusive 'letting go' is a must to experience the *Imago Dei* or the light of Beauty according to Waldron and Merton. Letting go or casting aside all that is false and selfish is the unpredictable and even unnatural challenge inherent to the Christian journey.

Merton's journals document well his unanticipated discoveries of embracing or attempting to embrace the solitary life. For example, 24 years after entering Gethsemani, he notes in his journal, 'Last night before going to bed, [I] realized what solitude really means: when the ropes are cast off and the skiff is no longer tied to land but heads out to see without ties, without restraints!'⁶ Here, not only is Merton claiming to realize the 'true' meaning of his primary task as monk 24 years since the start of his career, he is also characterizing the 'spiritual life' as inane culpability. He subsequently states: 'The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual. Spiritual life is guilt.'⁷ It is difficult to know how seriously to take these particular entries. However, since they reflect a motif in much of Merton's journal entries during the mid to late 1960s, one is inclined to take them quite seriously. The motif is one of continued growth, new and emerging views, frustration yet satisfaction with his monastic vocation, as well as, restless anticipation.

Like Luther, the eminent German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, challenges those who feel as though they have a sure grip or understanding of their Christian identity. Because for Moltmann, a Christian's *being* is utterly wrapped in *becoming*. A Christian's

becoming is a continual repentance, a continual new start in a new direction. It is a new start from sin to righteousness, from slavery to freedom, from doubt to faith, and from past to future. That is why the Christian's being is still hidden in the womb of the divine future. It does not yet appear what we shall be (1 Jn 3.2).⁸

For this very reason, Robert Waldron is wise to use Merton as guide to help others realize their own inherent contemplative gifts via the use of poetry. Merton is a prime example of one who is continually becoming, of one who is on a journey.

Merton's life was riddled with existential surprises and unexpected turns. Waldron reminds us that, as a true contemplative, Merton often reveals his incongruence of being through his poetry. Consequently, Merton's radical openness to revealing how he struggled with God, enjoyed God, feared God, and loved God through a dynamically relational existence exposes Merton as a mysterious exception to this world. The fact that Merton, not only in his poetry but in his monastic life in general, habitually pointed to a future that continually exists in the full pres-

5. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1953), p. 183.

6. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (eds.), *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 236.

7. Hart and Montaldo, *The Intimate Merton*, p. 244.

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 4.

ence of God, underscores both his deep level of faith as well as his prophetic nature. Yet despite such profound faith and prophetic calling, one question that seemed to follow Merton as a contemplative was, 'Why am I a Christian?' or 'Why am I a contemplative?' Jürgen Moltmann notes well such faith crises many wrestle with (such as Merton). In response to the former identity questions, Moltmann asks:

Well, am I really a Christian? Am I so firmly and definitely a Christian that I can produce arguments to support the fact, as if it were something finished and done with, and open to proof? What is the position if this 'being' of mine continually slips away from me when I want to lay hold of it as firmly as the question suggests? What if this 'being a Christian' which I am being asked about is something that *is* at all? What if it something that is involved in a continual process of *becoming*? What if our self-examination has to confess: I am a Christian and a non-Christian at the same time? Faith and doubt struggle within me, so that I have continually to cry out: 'Lord I believe, help my unbelief!' What if I am again and again thrown back to the beginning, where being and non-being wrestle with one another?⁹

These paradoxical questions of doubt and confidence, of questioning and assurance, are examples of what Merton experienced by engaging poetry for profoundly theological reasons. These are also examples of the risks and responsibilities inherent to approaching poetry contemplatively, as Robert Waldron is suggesting. Of course, this is not to diminish the potential fruits of reading poetry in a holy way. Evident in his own poetry, Merton undoubtedly experienced Eliot's 'Waste Land', but also God's 'Promised Land'. Written in the early 1950s, the opening lines of 'Elias—Variations on a Theme' foreshadow Merton's rugged yet divinely sanctioned contemplative journey:

Under the blunt pine
In the winter sun
The pathway dies
And the wilds begin
Here the birds abide
Where the ground is warm
And sings alone.¹⁰

These lines suggest that Merton, early on, was already becoming, or at least interested in becoming what he believed God desired him to be. By engaging poetry prayerfully and contemplatively, Merton became more conscious of the mysterious God—albeit this was frustrating and arduous at times. Alongside the existential and ontological deserts of his spiritual journey, Merton experienced deeply personal and theological joy. Although not always of equal tension, it seems that Merton wrestled with this dialectic of despair and joy throughout his monastic life. A similar 'tension of being' is revealed by many who share Merton's contemplative nature, such as, St Antony, Augustine, and St John of the Cross. So, one might say,

9. Moltmann, *Experiences of God*, p. 4.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 239.

becoming more conscious of the divine has its 'ups and downs'. Waldron does well to elucidate the precarious nature of such a journey, of the Christian journey. As an experienced contemplative poet himself, I think interested readers will find Waldron's book both challenging and hopeful.

Glenn Crider

GUNN, Robert Jingen, *Journeys into Emptiness: Dōgen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 360. ISBN 0-8091-3933-2 (paperback). \$19.95.

This book concerns 'the experience of emptiness' in the biographies of several men, principally Soto Zen founder Dōgen, Thomas Merton, and Carl Jung. In the Preface, Gunn asserts the real object of analysis is 'the experience—not the concept—of emptiness' which he regards as comparable across religious traditions and cultural differences (p. xi). Each of the men treated in the book, Gunn says, found their own tradition limited and inadequate; they were 'bound up in' their traditions (p. xiii).

Gunn moves rapidly from one religious tradition to the next, blurring distinctions. Bodhidharma's grave, empty but for one sandal, becomes 'an Eastern parallel to the resurrected Christ' (p. 30). Similarity can be found anywhere, of course, but the doctrinal contexts of these two empty graves are quite distinct. Gunn has a highly eclectic sense of context, which sometimes presents fragments of highly complex scholastic debates (for example, on Buddha nature, p. 40; or the sudden-gradual debates, p. 43). Gunn's writing style is very accessible and his portraits seem quite intimate. Not being in any sense an expert on Merton or Jung, I will focus attention on the chapter on Buddhist teachers, 'Embracing Emptiness in the East', which draws a highly abbreviated lineage from Sakyamuni Buddha to Dōgen, by way of Nagarjuna, Bodhidharma, and Hui Neng. Gunn presents a simplified view of Buddhist history, consisting of a few great men and their inner crises. He psychologizes Buddha's life story as if it were simply true, or as if Buddha had spoken from the psychiatrist's couch. He ignores the mythic rewriting, which long ago transformed the life of Buddha from personal reminiscences to encoded doctrine. However one might wish to read biographies of the Buddha or any hagiographies for 'the experience—not the concept', it is impossible to really escape doctrine.

The death of Buddha's mother just days after his (miraculous) birth is treated 'from the depth psychological point of view, [as] a foundational experience of emptiness, a deep psychic wound that provides an underlying motivation for a profound, relentless and determined spiritual search' (p. 14). His psychotherapist's reading of these narratives also filters out any sense of the truly miraculous, while in other places biographical data is presented uncritically, as for example, when we are told that Bodhidharma 'cut off his eyelids' (p. 5). Interestingly—and very typical of modern Western writing about Buddhism—almost none of the sources Gunn uses to describe Buddha's spiritual development are actually scriptural. Instead, he relies on modern paraphrases and interpretations, often of a partisan nature. He seems to adopt uncritically Mahayana's patronizing caricature of so-called Hinayana, Soto Zen diatribes against Tendai, and the 'sudden' (p. 63) teaching's straw man of 'gradual' practice (p. 67).