

Buddhist-Christian conversation, and both emerge as models and exemplars of inter-religious dialogue. Both use spiritual practice – the experience of contemplation/meditation – as the ground for interreligious dialogue, and both demonstrate that such conversation transforms the participants while deepening their commitment to their respective religious traditions.

In the final chapter, King reflects on the concept of engaged spirituality. Here he includes Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr, as two other conversation partners and models. What I find missing from this discussion is a deeper notion of action. As an academic – a teacher and writer – I find the ‘action’ that flowed from Merton’s and Nhat Hanh’s contemplation encouraging, but it is a step removed from the practice of the corporal works of mercy as exemplified by a Mother Teresa or a Dorothy Day. Is the action of teaching and writing an adequate response to the experience of genuine contemplation? Can service and social action draw a spiritual seeker into contemplation, or is the movement usually from contemplation to action? These are the questions I hope Robert King will address in his next book on engaged spirituality.

J. Milburn Thompson

MONTALDO, Jonathan (ed.), *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), pp. i-xviii + 189. ISBN 0-06-065602-6 (hardcover). \$25.

Merton’s practice as a visual artist has never been fully studied. This is not altogether surprising, given the voluminous weight of his legacy in writing. But Merton did leave over 800 drawings and more than 1300 photographs. What is to be made of them? It first should be said that not all are great works of art. Merton had a facility that only occasionally rose to the level of real quality. Jonathan Montaldo makes the case in his new book that the drawings are ‘relics’ of Merton’s contemplation, like the commentaries to God that he composed. Certainly that seems to be the case. Drawing, especially the late works inspired by Zen calligraphy and abstract expressionism appear to be a way the monk used to seize ‘the grip of the present’ in his imaginative and reflective life. As such, they seem to be by-products of his life of spiritual practice, not works of art designed in every instance to stand fully on their own.

In looking at Merton drawings now housed at Bellarmine University, it is these late drawings, mostly *not* included in the book, which are most compelling. These abstract drawings from the 1960s are on a variety of papers, some designed for art making, others scraps that happened to come to hand. Characteristically they are brush drawings in black ink, usually on a white sheet. The best of these calligraphic sketches show Merton playing with mark making, fully aware of the weight of ink on the paper, experimenting with degrees of absorbency ranging from translucency to the black sheen of more heavily applied pigment. Merton experimented with hand-printing and occasionally was sufficiently proud of what he had done to give an example to one of his correspondents. Some sheets show the barest of scratches: others are more fully worked out pictographs reminiscent of Southwest Indian designs.

The 1960s abstract works often come in series. For example, a series of circular designs run through a wide variety of kinds of ovals in bold strokes that look like Japanese or Chinese ink-brush inscriptions. In the elaboration of ideas that Merton explores in these drawings, issues of wholeness and disintegration, open and closed

forms, motion and stasis are endlessly worked out. He goes back and forth between pure abstraction and figural variations: crucifixes, fish, kneeling figures, and what appears to be a jazz musician alternate with triangular planes, shapes like tree branches and faint indications of verticals and diagonals suggesting generalized images of wind-blown grasses. These drawings are strongly related to the automatist practices of the 'Action Painters', those abstract expressionists who believed that the deepest recesses of the subconscious could be tapped through free pictorial improvisation.

It is in the endless repetition of certain shapes in the abstract drawings that we come closest to Merton as the mystic contemplative. In these drawings he is using a means readily available to center his thoughts on God. These are not symbols that stand for a given iconographic meaning. To paraphrase Coomaraswamy, these are symbols that search for meaning, rather than stand for a given meaning.

As for us as viewers, Merton did not make it easy. He signed very few of the drawings and was seldom instructive as to which way was up. Occasionally he offered titles, but mostly on works which had a clever but superficial relationship to traditional themes in Asian art: hence 'War Horse' and 'Lucky Dragon'. Merton did not have the exquisite sensibilities of a Franz Kline or a Robert Motherwell regarding the relationship of image to the surface it is made on. Merton seldom covered the whole sheet of paper. It is difficult to understand how Merton would visualize his work matted and framed, presented to the public. Although at times he achieved a wonderful poetic interchange of positive and negative spaces in his drawings, he seems to have been more interested simply in the making of signs and symbols, not the placement on the page or the relationship of the image to the edges of the paper. The difficulties accentuate the essentially private nature of this material.

Ultimately, Merton's art does deserve a carefully selected exhibition, and a good first show has already been done at the Museum of Fine Art in Owensboro, Kentucky. Ideally the drawings would be shown with a selection of the photographs. In contrast to the drawings that give intimate clues to Merton's inner world, the photographs show Merton exploring with joy the confines of Gethsemani. There too, the curator will face difficult problems. Should one use Merton's frequently blurry prints, or have new prints made from the surviving negatives, utilizing all the darkroom magic of burning and dodging to accentuate lights and darks? Is it a falsification to give the work the full benefit of the doubt, calling attention to the Trappist's powers of visualization rather than the inadequacies of his technical proficiency?

An additional challenge for a full-scale Merton exhibition is the state of some of the work. His drawings and photographs need to be better preserved with proper mounting and matting. The Thomas Merton Center has them in glassine envelopes in accordion folders but better protection is needed. Some are bent or crimped and require the full attention of a paper conservator.

Parallel to the monk/artist's own work, there is much research to be done on Merton's relationship to the visual arts at large. His parents were both painters and his father was associated briefly with Alfred Steiglitz's Gallery 291, where fellow exhibitors included such giants of American art as Marsden Hartley, Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe. (An Owen Merton retrospective is currently being organized in New Zealand by Roger Collins.) Thomas Merton was an astute observer of the arts and his close friendship with the New York painter Ad Reinhardt and the Lexington, Kentucky photographer, Eugene Meatyard, suggest that he kept reasonably up to

date. While the 1958 project for a book entitled *Art and Worship* never saw fruition, it is clear that art had a very central place in his life: as a source of creative pleasure, as an aid to meditation, as a way of celebrating God's creativity in nature, as a stimulus to his writing and thought, and as an aspect of familial identity.

Which brings us around to *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*. Jonathan Montaldo has made a selection of 92 drawings by Merton, which he has accompanied by an equal number of prayers or addresses to God, drawn from many examples of Merton's writing. The drawings he has selected come mainly from the 1950s, and are primarily drawings of heads. Most are done in a style strongly reminiscent of Matisse's graphic works and more particularly, his black and white decorations for the chapel of St Paul de Vence. As may be evident from the remarks above, I do not think that these representational drawings are consistently the best of Merton's practice. It is true, they do often possess an engaging economy of line and a nice balance of accents, but overwhelmingly, they look like pale reflections of the styles they are descendants of. Many are of women – there is a Mary Magdalene which looks appealingly like the singer Connie Francis – but for the most part these large-eyed, sentimental Virgin Marys, nuns and saints do not reward repeated examination. In many instances the sweetness of the drawings seem at odds with the gritty message of the prayers – the struggle for faith, for worthiness in the eyes of God, for religious authenticity. In other cases, the effort to match word to text falls short: a drawing of a featureless face is awkwardly and almost comically matched with a prayer starting 'Oh God, my God, why am I so mute?'

Montaldo describes the heads of women as 'powerful and mysterious' and argues that they reflect Merton's 'growing appreciation of women and the feminine in his life'. I find it hard to reconcile that view with the dull, placid, passive visages that fill these pages.

There are many Thomas Mertons. The Merton presented in *Dialogues with Silence* happens not to be one that resonates with me. The drawings illustrated in the book are tentative precursors to those housed at Bellarmine done in the 1960s, many of which show a more authentic, energetic and spiritually mature artistic expression. More work needs to be done in this fascinating area of Merton studies.

Peter Morrin

LAUGHLIN, John, *Reading Thomas Merton: A Guide to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000), pp. 218. ISBN: 0-7388-5613-4. \$31.99.

As the title of this book suggests John Laughlin's book has been written to introduce readers to Thomas Merton, both to his life and his writings, and to provide some evaluation of the books and other materials available by, and about, Merton. Laughlin's approach is broad, including sections on Merton websites, tapes of Merton's conferences, dissertations about him, the best places to purchase books, and what to expect when visiting a monastery. It is described in the publisher's blurb as 'an enticing guide through the forest of Merton literature' and as 'the perfect starting place for anyone who wanted to read Merton but did not know where to begin'. The error in the publisher's blurb, surely it should read 'didn't know where to begin', is a foretaste for the reader of what is to come on opening the pages of this book.

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