

Reviews

LABRIE, Ross, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001. pp. 263. ISBN 0-8262-1382-0 (hardcover). \$34.95.

At least three reviews of Ross Labrie's *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (hereafter *Inclusive Imagination*) are possible. The first would be the easiest and most obvious. It would include a number of features, among them these: a summary of the book's major claim, an analysis of the claim as it is developed, an evaluation that asks and answers this question: does the book successfully fulfill its own intent? The second review would be a bit more allusive, more playful, more subtle. It would detail, in short, the ways in which *Inclusive Imagination* shows that Merton is a master conversationalist in dialogue with myriad traditions, cultures, writers. The third review would be the most dangerous. It would discuss the subaltern tension present in the book, a tension central to Merton's own life as a child of his time: the tension between modernity and postmodernity.

The First Review

The book's major claim is this, quoted at length:

Growing up against the background of two world wars, which were to be followed by other regional wars, Merton experienced society as synonymous with divisiveness and nationalism. For this reason in part, perhaps, in the 1930s he looked outside of twentieth-century culture for an alternative vision. In Blake, Wordsworth, Saint John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart he encountered such an alternative discernment of human existence. Essentially, this involved the recovery of the self and its latent unifying, trans-social orientation toward being and the consciousness of being. The romantics and mystics suggested to Merton not the need to find worlds other than this one but rather the need to find other worlds *in* this one, worlds that one could not only think about but also live in (pp. 28-29).

In sum, *Inclusive Imagination* is devoted to demonstrating the three parts of this claim. First: Merton was informed by romanticism. Second: Merton was informed by mysticism. Third: together, romanticism and mysticism provided Merton a way into the world. Admirably, *Inclusive Imagination* teases out Merton's relationships to a host of romantics and mystics and the traditions that they represent.

Most compelling is *Inclusive Imagination's* claim that for Merton romanticism and mysticism were not discrete, separate movements, despite the limitations of grammar. By 'limitations of grammar' I mean this: the conjunction 'and' in the phrase 'the romantics and mystics suggested to Merton' implies that Merton was influenced by the romantics on one hand, by the mystics on the other. 'And' unifies and separates these two, making them co-equal, but distinct. However, *Inclusive Imagination* also holds that Merton blended these together. The first chapter, for instance, points to Merton's essay titled, 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal' (p. 6).¹ In this essay Merton claims that "the poet was always akin to the mystic" (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 6). In addition, *Inclusive Imagination* holds that Merton 'used the terms *imagination*, *intuition*, *contemplation*, and *mysticism*...as if they were interchangeable' (p. 6).

Yet, this interplay of romanticism/mysticism did not lead Merton into a severely interiorized life, a life of privatized fantasy and contemplation. In fact, *Inclusive Imagination* holds that this interplay led Merton in the opposite direction. It led him to embrace the world in its myriad forms.

The Second Review

Merton's embrace of the world certainly included other people and, even, what we call 'nature' (see, e.g., pp. 33-34). As *Inclusive Imagination* argues, Merton came to 'an inclusive view of society in which social relationships were perceived through an ontological lens' (p. 64). This means that Merton, infused by his blend of romanticism/mysticism, came to understand 'the spiritual reality that inhered in the object contemplated' (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 6). The world, for Merton, was not 'merely material and hence meaningless', but, indeed, infused by God (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 6). Or, to put it another way, as Merton matured he came to focus 'on the divine immanence in being' (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 54). This focus allowed him to see God in the world, not apart from, allowed him to embrace the other as infused with the divine.

One might suggest that this second review would be, simply, a continuation of the first. After all, doesn't the second part of the book's title, 'the Inclusive Imagination', suggest that the act of Merton's embrace is, indeed, part Merton's romantic/mystic worldview? Of course.

However, paraphrasing the work of Lawrence Cunningham, *Inclusive Imagination* notes that 'Merton was distinctive as a major religious writer in entering the "larger world of cultural discourse"' while remaining rooted in a particular religious tradition' (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 227). While this is not an explicit point of *Inclusive Imagination*, it is central to the work of the book nonetheless. Thus, it would form the center around which the second review would move. Merton was a conversationalist *par excellence*, a writer and reader whose habits of mind were extraordinary. Merton's most obvious conversation partners, in the explicit terms of *Inclusive Imagination*, are the romantics and the mystics: Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge (e.g. pp. 1-18), and St Gregory of Nyssa, St John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart (e.g. pp. 18-19) among them.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 245.

However, while *Inclusive Imagination* is focused on romanticism and mysticism, it also shows the ways in which Merton, as a romantic and mystic, reaches out constantly in conversation to others. Perhaps the best known conversation partner is 'the distinguished Buddhist scholar Daisetz Suzuki' (e.g. p. 19). Neither a romantic or a mystic (at least in the Christian sense of the word), Suzuki provided Merton an entrée into the world of Zen Buddhism, a world increasingly important to Merton as he moved into the late 1950s and 1960s. Merton's interest in Buddhism is well known, and *Inclusive Imagination* discusses it throughout its eight chapters. Perhaps less well known is Merton's ongoing conversations with many other writers and traditions. Aldous Huxley? Yes (p. 25). The Bhagavad Gita? Yes (p. 25). Heidegger? Yes (p. 36). Protestant Theology? Yes (p. 50). Sartre? Yes (p. 42). Psychoanalysis? Yes (p. 75). William Faulkner? Yes (p. 74). Taoism? Yes (pp. 234-35). Louis Zukofsky? Yes (p. 126).

Even as a book focused on Merton as romantic and mystic, *Inclusive Imagination* cannot help but move into an implicit study of Merton as a high-culture modernist, to borrow Lawrence Cunningham's terms. *Inclusive Imagination*, perhaps unconsciously, perhaps unknowingly, demonstrates the ways in which Merton, as romantic and mystic, was a modernist monk, a modernist writer, a modernist reader, open to the conversations of world.

The Third Review

But was he? That is to say, was he a modernist monk? A modernist writer? A modernist reader? The answers to these questions depend on the answers to two other questions: (1) About which Merton is one speaking? (2) Which definition of modernism does one use to discuss Merton?

To suggest that Merton, in his 'early' phase, can be classified as a modernist is to come dangerously close to the ridiculous. After all, as *Inclusive Imagination* notes, *The Seven Storey Mountain* offers a hint – and probably more than a hint – of Merton's attitude about the larger, non-monastic, non-Roman Catholic world when he joined the Trappists. According to Merton, the monastery at that point in his life offered 'a barrier and defense against the world' (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 57).² While *Inclusive Imagination* downplays the anti-modernist, anti-world implications of this passage in favor of what it suggests about the solitude Merton sought (p. 58), *Inclusive Imagination* none-the-less admits that this passage 'may be taken as a sign of Merton's desire to retreat from the mainstream of American society' (p. 58). Later, *Inclusive Imagination* goes so far to suggest that the early Merton was indeed different from the later Merton.

Consider the book's discussion of Merton's idea of freedom. *Inclusive Imagination* notes that 'Merton's appreciation for such inner freedom had developed considerably by the mid-1960s from the rather rigid, religiously orthodox idea of freedom that one encounters in works such as *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the early books of poetry' (p. 120). The phrase 'rather rigid, religiously orthodox idea of freedom' hardly needs to be interpreted in detail. Rigid is not, however understood, a good quality. Whatever positive characteristics *Inclusive Imagination* finds in the early Merton (and it finds many, rightly), it also suggests (albeit implicitly) that the early Merton was not

2. Merton, *The Seven-Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), p. 320.

the world-embracing, extraordinarily inclusive Merton of later years. *Inclusive Imagination* implies that the early Merton and the later Merton are not radically discontinuous, but, still, they are different (e.g. pp. 238-39).

Was the early Merton a modernist? No. Was the later Merton? Yes and no. The third review would concentrate on this yes and no, play it out, implicit as it is. *Inclusive Imagination* opens to its readers a tension central to the later Merton, a tension central to post-World War II America: the tension between modernism and postmodernism.

Of course, this statement begs the question raised above. How does one understand modernism? *Inclusive Imagination* provides one way to answer this question in its allusion to Lawrence Cunningham's work on the high-modernist Merton. With this allusion, *Inclusive Imagination* seems to suggest that modernism includes a rapacious intellect willing to span multiple and diverse literary traditions in order to pursue answers to questions that vex the human. Fair enough. However, I would like to suggest another version, based on my own work in postmodern rhetoric and poetics.

As I have argued elsewhere,³ postmodernism is best understood in the following way. It is a worldview that holds that languages are plural, histories ambiguous. Readers of the Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy will see my indebtedness to his work, to be sure. My point is this: the postmodern sensibility teaches us that no one language is necessarily superior to others and that one's own language can be emancipatory and oppressive, heroic and tragic. It also teaches us that no one history is superior to others and that one's own history can be emancipatory and oppressive, heroic and tragic. By contrast then, modernism would miss these dialectics present in language and history. A modernist understanding of history might suggest that American history is totally emancipatory and thus superior to other histories. A postmodernist understanding would suggest that, indeed, American history is emancipatory, but it is also filled with oppression. Thus, Americans might want to consider humility as a strength when engaged in cross-cultural discussions about the value of competing histories.

Without fully defining the terms, *Inclusive Imagination* suggests that the late Merton, child of romanticism and mysticism, sometimes was modernist, sometimes postmodernist. *Inclusive Imagination* maintains, for example, that Merton's long poem *Cables to the Ace* works in a 'postmodernist fashion' in order to deconstruct 'institutional and collective discourse' so that such discourse might be reduced 'to silence' (p. 175). As *Inclusive Imagination* holds, the late Merton 'was disillusioned by the saturation of Western culture by institutional language' (p. 172), a language that often was 'self-serving', and 'propaganda' (p. 173). *Inclusive Imagination* argues that *Cables to Ace* worked to undo this institutional language, to promote a better understanding of human language in history. In contrast, *Inclusive Imagination* suggests that *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton's book-length poem, is a 'modernist, structuralist poem' that works to create a 'common mythdream in which human beings wanted to be valued by one another' (p. 182). In its discussions of both *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, *Inclusive Imagination* shows how Merton was intensely concerned about the question of language and the question of history, both central to modernism and, especially, postmodernism.

3. Bradford T. Stull, *Religious Dialectics of Pain and Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

In all honesty, I must admit that my own reading of *The Geography of Lograire* contradicts the one presented in *Inclusive Imagination*. I have argued that *The Geography of Lograire* is a postmodern poem in the best sense of the term.⁴ Confessions of scholarly disagreement aside, it is in this tension between modernism and postmodernism that *Inclusive Imagination* is at its most provocative, its most powerful and, necessarily, its most incomplete. I say 'necessarily, its most incomplete' because *Inclusive Imagination* was not meant to be a study of the ways in which Merton is in conversation with, is informed by, modernity and postmodernity.

Yet, *Inclusive Imagination* is led to this juncture, this pivotal tension, not out of happenstance. Rather, I suggest that the book cannot help but head into this tension. Because Merton is a romantic/mystic who reaches out to the world, who is in conversation with multiple and diverse traditions and writers, Merton's work is marked by the dialectic of modernism and postmodernism. Romanticism as a language and history is important to Merton, but it is not enough. Mysticism as a language and history is important to Merton, but it is not enough. *Inclusive Imagination* demonstrates that he is informed by both, and is thus led to many other worlds, many other traditions, guided by these two languages and histories, but not contained by them.

All three reviews would suggest that *Inclusive Imagination* provides its readers a great service. With graceful prose it traces the ways in which Merton is informed by romanticism/mysticism and thus moves deeply into the world, deeply into conversation with global communities. *Inclusive Imagination* also suggests what might be the next important path in Merton studies. Following its subaltern lead, scholars and writers would do well to consider Merton in light of modernity and postmodernity. After all, consider that Merton, Trappist monk and Roman Catholic priest, came to 'encounter the divine by staring at a bowl of carnations in a monastery chapel or in looking at the statues of two reclining Buddhas in a part of the world far away from his monastic home' (*Inclusive Imagination*, p. 246). To make sense of this sublime image is, I suggest, the postmodern challenge.

Bradford T. Stull

KING, Robert H., *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. i-x + 202. ISBN 0-8264-1340-4 (hardcover). \$24.95.

This is a fine and worthwhile book. While not exactly groundbreaking, especially in regard to Merton scholarship, its juxtaposition of Merton and Nhat Hanh on the themes of an engaged spirituality and interreligious dialogue is insightful and well crafted. King tells the story of the development of these themes in the life and thought of his two subjects in a way that elicits reflection on contemplation and action in the reader. This is a book, then, that leads not only to knowledge but also potentially to self-knowledge.

Contemplation (or meditation, in Buddhist terms) is central to this book as it is to the lives of Merton and Nhat Hanh. King contends that both men, though immersed in different religious traditions and starting from very different places, arrive at what can be called an 'engaged spirituality'. Thus they found a way to resolve one of life's fundamental problems — the tension between contemplation and action — and forged a

4. Stull, *Religious Dialectics of Pain and Imagination*, pp. 61-94.

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