

ing for themselves, the rich Christian mystical/contemplative tradition.

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WEIS, Monica, *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise*, photographs by Harry L. Hinkle (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), pp. 157. ISBN 0-8131-2347-8 (hardcover). \$29.95.

One cannot read far into Merton's writings, from books to poems to journals, before being introduced to the natural landscapes of Gethsemani; its "green ice and its dead trees and silences" (p. 78). Commentary on deer, day, sky, heat, poison ivy and weather are typical first lines of many of his journal entries. And yet, with all so many books about Merton's spirituality, only one recent volume, Kathleen Deignan's *When the Trees Say Nothing: Thomas Merton's Writings on Nature*,<sup>1</sup> has addressed this significant source for Merton's prayer life. The current volume fills this gap.

In *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani: Landscapes of Paradise*, a Merton scholar and a Kentucky photographer have joined forces to produce a visual paradise, a "beautiful book with many windows" (p. 1) says Jonathan Montaldo in the book's "Introduction." Patrick Hart's "Foreword" suggests this elegant volume calls us to our own pilgrimage through the Kentucky landscape that formed and fed Merton's spiritual life. Merton lived on the margins of the worlds here; it was his desert as well as his desert island. In these woods, ice storms and visits from wildlife, Merton refined his ecological and sacramental vision, where each creature is "God coming to us" (p. 97). This book invites us to walk in the actual steps of Father Louis. Prose and pictures intertwine, with Merton's own voice and photographs peeking through those of Weis and Hinkle. Here amidst the knobs, mists and woods of central Kentucky, Weis and Hinkle beckon us to participate in the peace of this place.

The Introduction and five chapters are orchestrated to mimic the trajectory of Merton's life at Gethsemani. Merton first arrived at the abbey after dark in April, 1941, and already saw the landscape unfolding as soul music. Hinkle offers a photograph of a starry night, one Merton might have seen that first night on the "pale ribbon of road" that led to Trappist, Kentucky. Hinkle's photographs locate Merton's favorite haunts and hideouts. His photographs, each beautifully showcased with plenty of white space

on good paper, deliver us right into the middle of what Merton saw, and like him, we are called "to see with the heart" (p. 88).

Subsequent chapters follow Merton, or Father Louis as he was known, to the rusting red trailer and tool shed he used as early hermitages. Weis weaves her narrative into Merton's, to demonstrate that through nature "he understood 'something essential' about himself" (p. 88). As she harvested journal entries as departure points, we delight in the "Om" of the bullfrog, the woods that "cultivate me with their silences" (p. 86), and the *point vierge* between night dark and dawn, the pure nothingness that "attuned his heart to the cosmos" (p. 95). We encounter a few of Merton's favorite things: ponds, trees, weather, seasons, times of the day, and animals. Merton loved ponds, Weis says (Merton even named his poetry magazine *Monks Pond*) (p. 82). He loved to pray while walking under the trees, and described open-air prayer as "saturating the woods with psalms" (p. 86). Singled out by Hinkle's lens is one tall cedar tree next to the enclosure wall in shadows and light. These first landscapes move to photographs of those man-made: the east monastery wall (p. 24), the shops building and woodshed, scriptorium, a fence near the dairy barn. Hinkle, in the style of Merton, photographed landscapes and buildings, but also such ordinary things as "buckets, benches ... fence posts, [and] firewood" (p. xi).

The book's emphasis falls on Merton's final and most famous hermitage. Evocative photographs capture the stillness of the place, a place congenial to the solitude that Merton craved. Like Merton's own life, Weis and Hinkle move toward a conclusion to emphasize the conscious ecology of the smallest things: a bird, stones, a cup, a pair of jeans. Here we best see Merton's *one-pointed* unity of nature in God.

Before I opened the cover to discover Hinkle's fine photographs and Weis's gentle prose I held the book on my lap a good long while. I recalled my many trips to these same landscapes – the broad plains and grand vistas of monastery land, a Christmas Eve ice storm, a shivering white horse across a fence line, the steamy mist of July mornings after Lauds, sitting out an electric storm in a dark chapel, emerald moss encountered on the north side of a tree on the way to Brother René's prayer hut. Each of these deepens the miracle of Daily Office, the monk's chanting, the silence and sense of goodness that is found inside and outside the abbey walls. I longed to encounter not only Merton's Gethsemani in this vol-

ume, but my own Gethsemani, an invisible shimmer of God pulsing through field, flower, storm, mist, and moss.

Let's face it: it is easy enough to *not* go outside at Gethsemani—an expanse of dining room windows allows us to feast on the landscape in the comfort of heat and air conditioning, coffee cup, kitchen snacks, and favorite book in hand. The Vigil of the Hours keeps us busy, along with daily rosary and Chapel Talks, with naps and meals sandwiched in between. But it is in those in-between times that the *place* itself rises up and calls us outside, like medicine for the soul.

Thanks to Jonathan Montaldo's Introduction, it doesn't take but a few pages to consider this almost a poetic and artistic guidebook; like Merton, we too find these landscapes a source of prayer. Weis immerses us in geography on both sides of the road: the abbey itself, Dom Frederic's Lake, McGuinty's Hollow, and Saint Malachy's Field. Now the knobs that I look at from the retreatants' garden have names: Cross Knob, and Vineyard Knob.

A delicious extra is that the book's end papers offer a map of these very places. True to Patrick Hart's Foreword, I yearned to visit these far reaches of the territory, and so I paid another visit to Gethsemani. At the Gift Shop I asked if it was possible to walk the trails shown in the back of the book: not only was it possible, the clerk offered an even better map. I was delighted. I set off, grabbed a walking stick by the gate of the enclosure wall, and with water bottle and map in hand, I headed out on to encounter Merton's and possibly my own "Landscapes of Paradise."

Two hours later, past Dom Frederic's Lake and St. Enoch's stone house, I found myself in the middle of a field of wild yarrow and daisies, vaguely lost. If I turned back I could find my way to the Statues, if I forged ahead, perhaps I could intersect the path to Hanekamp's .... or, I could just ... *stand* in this place. The late afternoon sun shone fat and golden in a Kentucky sky. A family of tiny blue butterflies lazed by. Monastery bells rang in the distance. Paradise. "It is a strange awakening to find the sky inside of you," Merton wrote about Gethsemani (p. 121). For a moment I was sure I heard Father Louis laughing.

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1. Kathleen Deignan, ed., and John Giuliani, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Thomas Merton's Writings on Nature* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003).

Cynthia Ann Hizer