

mercy inspires the freedom to forgive. During that holiest season of the year, the Triduum, Merton focuses on two central words of the Scriptures: "*Hesed*"—the "loving kindness" constant in the covenant of the Hebrew Scriptures and "*metanoia*"—the "change of heart" response to the Gospel by the faithful disciple. These are the source and consequence of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ celebrated in Easter. "This gift, this mercy, this unbounded love for God for us has been lavished upon us as a result of Christ's victory." The Second Sunday of Easter, concludes this journey with Scripture and Merton. The light of Christ that flickered in darkened churches to announce the Resurrection is experienced in the inner room of the reader.

In reading one's own daily journaling of this season of prayer, the Christian can recognize his or her maturing into union with Christ and can say with St. Paul, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." This compilation of readings and reflections provides the reader with small seeds of contemplation that will grow into a greater knowledge of the Risen Lord.

Fr. Ron Atwood

WALDRON, Robert, *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, Ltd, 2007), pp. 101 ISBN 0-232-52714-8 (paperback). \$16.95.

Those with an artistic temperament will love this book. Those who want to explore time-tested or new insights into contemplation as an act of *attention* will also love this book. Basing his work on Thomas Merton's experience with and love for art, Robert Waldron has created a gem of a treatise on prayer—from the original poem, "Attention," to the final chapter on love. The reader will be captivated by Waldron's graceful prose, his ability to insert biographical data at just the right moment, and his fresh insights into Merton's transformative experiences. As long-time English teacher, reader of psychology and of Merton, Waldron is aptly equipped to delve into Merton's life and writing. His opening chapter, devoted to a biography of Merton, is both full and lean: full enough for the neophyte and lean enough for the seasoned Merton reader.

In "The Connoisseur of Beauty," Waldron traces Merton's fascination with art during his pre-monastic days. With skill, he juxtaposes the "pictures of little irate Byzantine-looking saints"

(14) that Owen Merton was drawing in his last illness with Tom's fascination with the Byzantine mosaics in the churches in Rome. He also describes Merton's vision of his dead father as a mystical experience. When Merton writes in *Seven Storey Mountain* that during this eerie event he was "pierced deeply with a light," Waldron deftly reminds us of a similar piercing: Bernini's famous statue of *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (17-18).

Waldron spends considerable time discussing Merton's visit to the 1939 World's Fair in New York and his critique of paintings by Fra Angelico, Bruegel, Bosch, and El Greco. What Merton discovers about art and what is important for contemplation is the necessity of *seeing*. Merton's ability to see the unique *haecceitas* of each being enables him to later write about the importance of seeing rightly: "The first step in the interior life" is to unlearn "our wrong ways of seeing, tasting, feeling..." (quoted 24).

To underscore how *attention* is a pre-requisite for prayer, Waldron highlights similarities between the life and writing of Merton and Simone Weil, allowing the reader to understand how a theory of beauty involves *seeing*. "Every true artist," Weil comments, "has had real, direct, and immediate contact with the beauty of the world, contact that is of the nature of a sacrament" and "Looking is what saves us" (20). Merton echoes this same belief in many of his journals and published writing. In his commentary on the works of Fra Angelico, Merton declares: "Looking at this picture is exactly the same sort of thing as praying" (quoted 20). Whereas Weil sees all types of beauty as the bait God uses to win the soul and "open it to the breath from on high" (17), Waldron suggests that for Merton, the bait was the captivating beauty of Rome's churches.

These key ideas of Chapter 1 lay the foundation for all the subsequent chapters. In "The Close Reader of *Logos*," Waldron explains how, after his entrance into the monastery, Merton's love of art was transferred to Gregorian chant and *lectio divina*. Using carefully sifted biographical facts and tantalizing vignettes from Merton's journals to support his thesis, Waldron details how Merton's original attitude of *contemptus mundi* --with its rejection of the visual arts--was gradually modified to a more incarnational view of nature. Chapter 3 outlines the role Czeslaw Milosz played in introducing Merton to the writing of Simone Weil and offers a solid interpretation, by two recognized literary scholars, of the George Herbert poem cherished by Weil. These pages alone make interesting reflective reading for the contemporary seeker.

"Alone With the Alone," Chapter 4, focuses primarily on *A Vow of Conversation* and how Merton's study of Zen enhanced his ability to see. Indeed, Waldron considers this text as a kind of documentary on "learning to see" (49). He describes Merton's frequent journal jottings about the weather as new and fresh examples of his increased ability for "direct seeing" (61). They are, Waldron maintains, not Western but Eastern descriptions (50), akin to a Japanese pen and ink drawing, or the piercing poetry of Wallace Stevens and Robinson Jeffers (50). Such dabbling with Zen and seeing as no-seeing (59) sets the stage for two chapters on specific art forms Merton enjoyed in his later years: calligraphy and photography. Delightful as these two chapters are, I suspect there is meat here for separate book-length studies of the relationship between seeing/contemplation and Merton's art.

The final chapter, "Love and Do What You Will," investigates Merton's relationship with "M" against the backdrop of T.S. Eliot's Prufrock, that quintessential victim of modernism paralyzed by fear and his own vulnerability. Waldron's take on the events of Merton's last years is to see how an inner gaze toward the ego is transformed into an outer gaze (91) that embraces a new gentleness (82-3). He regards Merton's relationship with "M" as a necessary prelude to his healing experience at Polonnaruwa. "Gazing upon the Polonnaruwa Buddhas," writes Waldron about the famous epiphany, "is simultaneously an aesthetic experience as well as a deeply religious one" (88). Great art always takes your breath away, but when you have the power of *attention*, another level of reality can be experienced. Waldron is convinced (and is convincing) that Merton's ability to *see* becomes a living out of Weil's concept that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (quoted 90). Indeed, in Waldron's view, Merton's life from the 1939 World's Fair, with its prophetic critique of Bruegel's *The Wedding Dance*, to the great Buddhas at Polonnaruwa is a spiritual journey of increasing attention, culminating in a "numinous mystical experience" of wholeness (91).

Two brief quibbles, however: the author several times alludes to the importance of the doors of perception being cleansed without noting the source: William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and refers to "The Panther" by Rilke and "The Snowman" by Wallace Stevens without quoting lines of the poem for non-literary scholars. True, a bibliographic reference is provided, but having at least a stanza of each poem would help most readers.

Nevertheless, this focused study of art as a vehicle for learning-to-see is a solid contribution to Merton studies. *Master of Attention* is Waldron's fourth book on Merton. After studies of Merton from a Jungian perspective, an examination of his poetry, and an analysis of his poetry, essays, and journals, Waldron is admittedly a seeker of Merton's secret spark. He suspects the spark—the way to deeper prayer—is *attention*. I suspect he has it right this time.

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