

thought was the anniversary of her vows (missing it by one day), Merton reassures her: “He loves you very much, you know, and He has proved it by letting you suffer. . . . If there were one present I would really like to give you it would be this: that you be overwhelmed with the sense that whatever may be your infirmities they, and they most of all, are your most infallible claim upon His infinite love. That is one grace I want for myself too, I certainly have plenty of infirmity to cash in on” (65). These and similar statements of spiritual counsel recorded throughout the book radiate love; although the words come from Merton, the empathy they imply bespeaks a trusting, open soul on the receiving end, saying almost as much about the listener as the speaker.

*Thomas Merton and Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship* ends with an Afterword by Sister Carol Thresher, SDS, in which she describes Sister Thérèse as a “living legend” (173), a transcendent artistic spirit and a person of rare selflessness, who embodied the Salvatorian charism (175). The Afterword is followed by a 1974 poem of Lentfoehr’s called “Song for a Marriage” (177-78) in which can be heard the voice of a gifted poet celebrating love as the heart of creation. The choice to conclude the book in this way fortifies Nugent’s intentions to confer on the accomplishments of Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr their rightful consideration.

Deborah Kehoe

WALDRON, Robert, *Thomas Merton—The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2012) pp. x + 146. ISBN 978-0-232-52924-1 (paper) £12.99.

The title of Robert Waldron’s book, *The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance*, the image of a nude Eve, sporting a sparse but discreetly positioned spray of leaves, and the name of Thomas Merton—all work together to create a cover designed to catch the reader’s attention. Observing that scholars have “shied away” from addressing Merton’s love for M., Waldron undertakes to do just that by examining the poems Merton wrote in 1966 after falling in love with a young woman assigned to care for him while he was hospitalized for back surgery. Waldron “cross-references” the poems with entries in the personal journal Merton was keeping at the time to illustrate how, in both poems and journal entries, Merton celebrates the passionate love he feels for M. even as he struggles to reconcile that love with his life as a monk.

A few words about Waldron’s sources—both the poems and the journal—may help to place his book in context. Merton entrusted the poems, inspired by his love for M., to the care of his friend and publisher

James Laughlin, who printed the poems in 1985 in an expensive, limited edition of 250 copies, simply entitled *Eighteen Poems*.<sup>1</sup> By that time, three of the poems had already been published in 1977 in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*.<sup>2</sup> Five others would later appear in the sixth volume of Merton's journal, *Learning to Love*,<sup>3</sup> published in 1997. More recently, Lynn R. Szabo included thirteen of the eighteen poems in *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*,<sup>4</sup> published in 2005. In addition, excerpts from the poems have appeared in Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*,<sup>5</sup> and in various articles, essays and books, as well as in Patrick F. O'Connell's entry on *Eighteen Poems* in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*.<sup>6</sup> However, Waldron's book marks the first publication of all eighteen poems in a single trade volume and includes two poems that until now were only available in the limited edition published by Laughlin: "Two Songs for M." and "Gethsemani, May 19, 1966."

The journal *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (a title chosen by the editor, who is also the author of this review), is the sixth of seven volumes of Merton's private journals and spans the period from January 2, 1966 to October 8, 1967. The volume includes three appendices: "A Midsummer Diary for M." (LL 303-48), a short journal written in June 1966, which Merton shared with M. and a copy of which he entrusted

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1. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 447-48, 615-18, 801-802.

3. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 52-54, 56-57, 59-61, 64-65, 131-33; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.

4. Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005) 188-219.

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 454, 456.

6. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Eighteen Poems," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 128-32. O'Connell concludes the entry with a concise and cogent description of *Eighteen Poems* that may be especially helpful to readers of this review who are unfamiliar with the collection: "the sequence as a whole traces the pattern of the relationship from an initial experience of holistic 'paradise-consciousness,' a sense of oneness not only with one another but also with the natural world, and with its divine source, through a period of anguish caused by the fact of physical separation and by the tension between commitment to another person and commitment to a solitary vocation, to a tenuous yet genuine resolution that both embraces the bond of shared experience and accepts the necessity of letting go of the other and of the possibilities she embodies" (132).

to the safekeeping of James Laughlin; “Some Personal Notes, January-March 1966” (LL 351-67), which Merton kept in a small spiral notebook; and “A Postscript” (LL 371), an entry, dated April 14, 1966, from one of Merton’s reading notebooks. The titles of the second and third of these appendices were given to the selections by the journal editor. Although Waldron is “cross-referencing” the poems with the journal, he does not quote directly from the journal; instead he paraphrases Merton’s journal entries. The only exceptions are “A Postscript” for which Waldron cites the notebook, housed in the Merton collection at Syracuse University, rather than *Learning to Love*, and a single direct quotation.

*The Exquisite Risk of Love* consists of an Introduction and eighteen short chapters—each bearing the title of one of the eighteen poems. The stanzas (and in the case of the prose poem “Certain Proverbs Arise out of Dreams,” the paragraphs), are interspersed with Waldron’s explication and commentary. In addition to making references to Merton’s journal, Waldron introduces and discusses a host of topics related to Merton’s life and work that, in Waldron’s view, shed light on the poems. For example, while introducing the first of the poems, “With the World in My Bloodstream,” Waldron considers the significance of having a home, likening Merton to Henri Nouwen and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Thus Waldron observes that Nouwen found a home at L’Arche, Hopkins in the Society of Jesus, and Merton at the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani where, Waldron notes, no women were allowed; where, in an all-male community, a monk often finds “a substitute” for the absence of the feminine in Mary; and where one renounces life’s vital aspect of “touch.” These observations about the monastic life set a context for Waldron’s reading of Merton’s relationship with M. Waldron compares Merton’s experience and poems with those of writers such as Hart Crane, John Donne, George Herbert and T. S. Eliot and makes reference to religious figures such as St. Bonaventure, St. John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart. Waldron reads Merton through the lens of Carl Jung who, Waldron writes, would describe Merton “as an unbalanced man” who “has allowed his intellect to dominate his personality at the expense of his emotional life” (124).

The book reads like a labor of love on Waldron’s part. His excitement for the project and his conviction about the significance of the poems is apparent throughout. Waldron’s voice as a writer comes through vividly which makes the tone of the book conversational. As I was reading, I had the feeling that Waldron was “speaking” to me and other readers. In fact, I could imagine each chapter as a short talk. As a result, Waldron’s style is certainly readable and the content is thought-provoking.

Having said that, I must add that there are several aspects of the book

that warrant caution on the part of the reader. Some are matters of fact, others matters of interpretation. Here is an instance in which both fact and interpretation are problematic: Waldron quotes Merton reflecting on his purpose in writing in a paragraph Merton wrote in a notebook entry of April 14, 1966—a passage published as “A Postscript” in *Learning to Love*:

For to write is to love: it is to inquire and to praise, or to confess, or to appeal. This testimony of love remains necessary. Not to reassure myself that I am (“I write therefore I am”), but simply to pay my debt to life, to the world, to other men. To speak out with an open heart and say what seems to me to have meaning.

Waldron mistakenly states that the passage was written a year after Merton met M. (9) even though his note correctly identifies the date of the entry as April 14, 1966 (16). While error in dating is a relatively minor matter, Waldron uses erroneous dating to support his view that “Merton’s writing perspective suffered a tremendous sea change when he met M.” (9). Waldron characterizes the “sea change” this way:

Prior to M., Merton’s writing was much involved in Catholic apologia. As he [Merton] describes it, his writing was too dogmatic; too much a list of things one had to obey and do. Not good writing because, although many admired it, it was fraught with compassion. The best writing is direct admission without embellishment. (9)

There is no compelling evidence to support the thesis of a “sea change” in Merton’s writing, before and after M., nor is there reason to accept Waldron’s characterization of Merton’s writing before M. as “apologia.” While some have observed that Merton’s best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948, is marked by a triumphalistic view of Catholicism, neither the autobiography nor Merton’s subsequent writing can be construed as “apologia.” I simply do not know what to make of Waldron’s statement that Merton’s writing prior to 1966 was not good writing “because it was fraught with compassion.” A typo perhaps? What Merton wrote in the notebook on April 14, 1966 was this:

The bad writing I have done has all been authoritarian, the declaration of musts, and the announcement of punishments. Bad because it implies a lack of love, good insofar as there may yet have been some love in it. The best stuff has been more straight confession and witness. (LL 371)

It is worth noting here that when Merton assessed his own writing in a

graph he constructed in 1967, he identified only one book as “awful” (*What Are These Wounds?*), one as “very poor” (*Exile Ends in Glory*), and one as “poor” (*Figures for an Apocalypse*). Other categories included “less good,” “good,” “better” and “best.” He did not place any books in the category of “best.” Interestingly, he rates *The Seven Storey Mountain* as “better.”<sup>7</sup>

Waldron extends the before and after comparison to Merton’s poetry. In the Introduction to *The Exquisite Risk of Love*, Waldron asserts that Merton’s “poetry prior to *Eighteen Poems* was romantic and traditional with a preference for rhymed poems. The major exception of his poetic opus is the nearly unreadable *The Geography of Lograire*” (3). Even a quick perusal of *In the Dark before Dawn*, the collection of Merton poems selected and edited by Lynn Szabo, offers ample evidence to the contrary. The collection, arranged thematically and chronologically, highlights the breadth and depth of Merton’s poetry from the ’40s, through the ’50s and into the ’60s. Certainly, Merton developed as a poet over time and the poems inspired by Merton’s love for M. are part of his story and his poetry. As Szabo illustrates, these poems explore the theme of what it means to be human—one theme among many in Merton’s poetic corpus. Over the years, Merton explored the landscapes of geography and of the sacred within. He was also writing poems about history’s watershed events at Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Auschwitz and engaging the issues of the world and its cultures. But I find nothing to suggest that *Eighteen Poems* signals the turning point that Waldron suggests.

There are other points on which Waldron and I differ. For example, he writes, “As a monk, he was of the mind that one must win God’s love by one’s actions” (22). This statement clashes with what I read Merton to be saying about his experience of Christian faith and more precisely his experience of God. God’s love and mercy are grace—pure gift. On other occasions, Waldron wrestles with the state of Merton’s soul and whether or not and how he has “violated his vow”: “And so we are then forced to ask ourselves if he is committing a mortal sin, thereby endangering his immortal soul” (122). Is this really a question we need to ask ourselves?

In his last chapter, Waldron observes that “It is enriching to read both the *Eighteen Poems* and *Learning to Love* simultaneously.” Then he adds: “But if I had to choose which of the two is the finer chronicle of Merton’s love for M., I would have to say that it is found in his poetry” (145). I resist characterizing either one as the finer chronicle. In my view, both are powerful expressions of Merton’s experience and insight—clearly

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7. Thomas Merton, “*Honorable Reader*”: *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 150-51.

different modes of expression. After reading Waldron's book and other considerations of Merton's love for M., I can't help thinking Merton is better served by our reading the poems and the journal first-hand.

Waldron's book makes it possible for us to do just that. To do justice to Merton's poems, I would recommend reading each poem through from start to finish before reading Waldron's explication and commentary. I would also encourage readers to take the time to read the journal passages that Waldron paraphrases. Certainly, he is intent on being faithful to Merton's meaning. Nevertheless, paraphrasing has its limits and, often the journal context—what precedes or follows the passage—is integral to understanding Merton's meaning. One additional example from the book may serve to make my point. Reflecting on a promise Merton makes to Abbot James Fox, Waldron writes: "To understand the extent of the power Gethsemani and its abbot had over Merton, Merton allowed himself to be coaxed into writing and signing, on 8 September 1966, a commitment that he would never live anywhere but Gethsemani, and that he would continue to live the life of a hermit and never marry." Waldron adds: "We [*sic*] cannot help feeling, since Merton at the time of this signing was studying the absurdist Albert Camus, that Merton's signing of this written vow is absurd: absurd for the abbot to suggest it, and absurd for Merton to agree to it" (89). In his journal, Merton put it this way:

Thursday the 8th I made my commitment—read the short formula I had written (simplest possible form). Dom James signed it with me content that he now had me in the bank as an asset that would not go out and lose itself in some crap game (is he sure—? The awful crap game of love!). A commitment "to live in solitude for the rest of my life in so far as health may permit" (i.e. if I grow old and get too crippled an infirmary room will count as solitude??).

Merton's tone is sardonic to be sure but the next line is not: "After that I was at peace and said Mass with great joy" (*LL* 129). Reading Waldron's words and then Merton's helps me to appreciate just how difficult it is put what Merton writes into our own words—and this is as true of Merton's poems as it is of his journals.

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THOMPSON, Phillip M., *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), pp. xxi + 112. ISBN 978-1-62032-252-9 (paper) \$17.00.

Once, during shared *lectio divina* in the hallowed Merton Hall of Genesee