

NUGENT, Robert, SDS, *Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: St Pauls Editions, 2012), pp. xxiv + 194. ISBN 978-0-8189-1339-6 (paper) \$14.95.

When a slender, unimposing volume of biographical study manages to deliver a wealth of pertinent facts as well as engaging revelations about its subjects—including the one I thought I already knew—that book earns my respect. Quoting generously from what he calls a “clockwork correspondence” (18) of approximately twenty years between Father M. Louis and Sister Thérèse, the formal terms with which they addressed each other throughout their acquaintance (as noted by Paul Pearson on page xvii), Robert Nugent skillfully traces the arc of this remarkable relationship. The book is a boon to Merton studies for many reasons.

First, as Pearson also points out in the Preface, this study takes a significant step toward filling the need for more extensive explorations of Merton’s associations with influential women. Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, SDS, author of *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton*, an in-depth analysis of Merton’s verse, invaluable for the personal insights of a friend and fellow poet into his craft, is indisputably one of those women. Additionally, key people who were close to Sister Thérèse have advocated for scholarly treatment of her poetics and of her friendship with Merton. In fact, in the introduction, Nugent explains good-naturedly that he found his impetus for the book in the words of one of Thérèse Lentfoehr’s former Salvatorian Sisters calling for someone to “crawl out from somewhere . . . and write about her alone” (xix). While not about Sister Thérèse alone (as Nugent carefully notes), the book at its core is a detailed biographical chronicle of her life, vocation and death. This running narrative creates the context in which the sister’s friendship with the famous monk is explored. This structure accomplishes two purposes: it tells the heretofore untold story of who Sister Thérèse was in her own right and offers “Merton aficionados . . . one more side of [his] multi-layered personality” (1). It is indeed enlightening to see Merton from this angle, that is, in relationship with a woman who, like himself, was an intensely multi-faceted character and a devoted correspondent who both gave to and asked much of their friendship.

The title of the introduction, “Listening In,” suggests that rather than assume the dominant voice of the text, Nugent will allow the words of Lentfoehr and Merton to advance the narrative with minimal authorial commentary. The book’s 422 endnotes, referencing numerous primary sources, largely letters and journals, attest to the success of this strategy. The fact that the two friends met face to face only twice in twenty years

(21) underscores the extraordinary significance of the written word as the bonding agent of their relationship. The author cites these references within a framework of seven chapters based on the chronology of Thérèse Lentfoehr's life and the evolution of her relationship with Merton, including a chapter on her early life (she was born in 1902), her entrance into religious life, her literary and academic work, and her life after Merton until her own death in 1981.

From this "listening in" the author assembles a vivid and balanced portrait of the two main characters, with no trace of effusion or slant. Thus Nugent succeeds admirably at achieving his purpose, stated in the introduction, that readers will "gain some insight into a more informal side of Merton and will meet and come to know one of Merton's closest friends, who . . . has never received the due recognition for the part she played in his life and work" (xxiv). One of the first lessons the reader learns about the two friends is that their lives contained memorable parallels beyond the obvious connection of their religious vocations, common experiences that one could reasonably assume deepened the bond between them. Thérèse Lentfoehr, like Thomas Merton, was the child of an artist. Also like Merton, she was formally educated in literature, earning a Master's degree in English from Marquette University, and was a classroom teacher of English composition and literature. Very pertinent is the fact that she was, also like Merton, a recognized poet (she published five volumes of verse) and a literary critic. Significantly, while the accounts of their initial contact vary somewhat, the consistent element of the different versions of how Father Louis "met" Sister Thérèse is that the contact was occasioned by poetry, written by one and admired by the other. There is apparently no extant artifact to clarify the details (16-17). (Perhaps the ambiguity concerning this first meeting of minds has its own poetic resonance?)

The first documented exchange aptly enough also centered upon poetry, edited by Lentfoehr, one selection of which was reviewed by Merton in what Thérèse considered "unnecessary and sophomoric" (18) terms—and she wrote to tell him so. Not long after that tense encounter, however, she wrote to him again, this time to praise his recently published *The Seven Storey Mountain*. When Merton replied by sending her an original typescript of the book, he, as Nugent puts it, planted "the seed" of what would become Sister Thérèse's "Merton collection" (18), a passionately maintained, single collector's archive, unmatched in its expansiveness, a testimony of her lifelong devotion to his life and work.

Commendably, Nugent does not omit the idiosyncrasies and vulnerabilities of each party in the friendship nor the difficult moments that these traits occasionally caused. For example, while he is careful to render

Sister Thérèse as a loyal supporter of Merton's career, he also shows that she apparently could be possessive and relentless, sometimes exasperatingly so, when it came to procuring artifacts for her Merton collection, particularly photographs of him, especially in the early days. Nugent also relates an incident wherein Sister Thérèse insisted on straightening up Merton's hermitage during a visit there in 1967, audacity that rankled in Merton and prompted Tommie O'Callaghan to remind him that "Thérèse was his 'first fan' and knew more about him and his work than anyone else" and to entreat him to be more patient with her (159-60). Finally, Nugent includes details showing how Sister Thérèse's commitment to Merton had an element of emotional instability, such as her reaction to learning about Merton and M. Nugent writes that according to one of her former students, "the revelation threw her into a royal tizzy so that she had wept almost hysterically when she told him about it" (141-42). The fact that she destroyed the letters in which Merton apparently confided the affair to her (and noted emphatically that she did so) (142) further evokes the fierce intensity of her attachment to Merton.

Nor does Nugent's story depict a perfect Merton. The author notes that in addition to frequent gifts of relics and other sacred objects that Thérèse bestowed on Merton, she also willingly offered her services as a typist, an act of generosity to which Merton on occasion responded, in Nugent's word, "disingenuously" (hinting, albeit gently, that Merton was taking advantage of her), such as when Merton wrote to her: "I only permit myself to impose on you because you say the work is entertaining and that it amuses you" (79). A more powerful implication of Merton's capacity for insensitivity regarding Thérèse is Nugent's account of how in 1972, in preparation to write her previously mentioned book on Merton's poetry for *New Directions*, she traveled to Bellarmine where she was denied access to Merton's private materials because Merton had not listed her among those who had permission to read them, and how this experience led to an outburst of grief and anger overheard by others in the guesthouse where she was staying during her visit to Louisville. An apologetic James Laughlin tried to assuage her feelings in a letter several months after the incident, by telling her "that Tom was just daydreaming when he wrote that part of the trust Indenture, and did not name you" (169).

Overall, what resounds most forcefully in this study are the affirming portrayals of Merton and Lentfoehr's friendship. The book is rich with passages from their letters conveying the true nature of this bond between two friends sharing a life of total submission to God, yet not free of the anguish that is common to people who walk by faith. The following excerpt is but one illustration. Writing to Thérèse on what he mistakenly

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.

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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