

Pearson intersperses Merton's reflections on contemplation with Merton's contemplative poetry. This style breaks up the contemplative notes and essays in a valuable way and helps to move the reader away from approaching contemplation as a completely mental exercise of the rational mind. As Pearson quotes from a conference by Merton in Alaska, "Mental prayer is only a phrase—you cannot pray with your mind" (25). Another essay Pearson includes further addresses this point: "How does the theology of prayer approach this problem? Not by reasoning but by symbol, by poetic insight, leading directly to those depths of the heart where these matters are experienced and where such conflicts are resolved" (from "Toward a Theology of Prayer" [20]). As with Thurston's volume, Pearson has arranged complementary selections. His alternation of poetry and prose also illustrates the point Merton is making about contemplation's need to lead from the mind to the heart and to the imagination.

Each of these slim volumes should appeal to both the new and seasoned Merton reader. Those new to Merton will find many hooks to lead them into his other works. Long-time readers will see something they have read before in a new light in Thurston's framing and juxtaposition of the quotations, and may find new gems in Pearson's thoughtful and diverse selections. Just do not expect, judging a book by its cover, to find each book to read like its companion. In constructing a book of thoughtful meditations, there are many ways to get it right, not unlike in prayer and meditation itself. As Merton puts it in *On Christian Contemplation*, "It isn't a question of there being one right way to pray, or one right answer to the question of prayer, and we should be perfectly free to explore all sorts of avenues and ways of prayer" (25).

Mark C. Meade

Thomas Merton, *Precious Thoughts: Daily Reading from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton*, selected and edited by Fiona Gardner (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2011), pp. 175. ISBN 978-0-232-52883-1 (paper) £10.99.

Robert Giroux, during his tenure as a trustee for the Merton Legacy Trust, often voiced his disapproval to fellow trustees Anne McCormick and Tommie O'Callaghan of what he called "fabricated books" that were put together by editing selections or excerpts from across Merton's writing. He disliked these "re-packagings" because he judged these collections threatened to deflect from the integrity of Merton's presentation of himself and his ideas in the more complete context of the books he had actually written for publication in his lifetime. While Giroux would

not have called “fabricated” *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*¹ or Patrick O’Connell’s recent edition of Merton’s *Selected Essays*,² I doubt he was amused, for instance, at my own edited selections from Merton’s work, like *Choosing to Love the World*³ and *Thomas Merton in His Own Words*.⁴ Fiona Gardner’s *Precious Thoughts* is another example in that burgeoning genre of selections from Merton’s literature to make a book that is earning one of Bob Giroux’s now posthumous frowns.

While ignoring (although not without respectful qualms) the judgment of this powerful guardian-dragon of Merton’s legacy, I can still appreciate Gardner’s service to Merton’s readers, whether ripened or fresh, in providing instances of his gifts for spiritual direction embedded within his correspondence. Gardner underlines expressions of important themes that can easily be overlooked when plowing through Merton’s correspondence selected and published in five volumes by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. In his letters to persons of high or low estate, the monk was prodigal in his gifts for expressing intimacy with a correspondent. His letters aim to produce right words for a particular correspondent’s real-time concerns and questions. Merton is a prime example of a “living text” for studying the ancient monastic tradition of spiritual mothers and fathers who responded to requests to provide a “word of salvation” by an interlocutor in crisis who needed immediate advice: “Amma, what should I do?” As Gardner is a practicing psychotherapist, she professionally appreciates this tradition and has made a book of excerpts from Merton’s letters that provide still cogent samples of his general counsel for those wanting to live an everyday spiritual life. The book’s title is taken from an observation by Boris Pasternak, winner of the Nobel Prize and author of *Doctor Zhivago*, who valued the “precious thoughts” that studded the letters he had received from Thomas Merton. Gardner organizes her compilation of Merton’s “precious thoughts” by mining nuggets of insight for day-to-day reflections through a year’s twelve months. Although a Merton drawing precedes each month’s reflections, she has chosen to forego giving directive “chapter titles.” In her introduction she provides only the most general pointers with which to approach the themes of her selections, but a close reading provides ample recurring themes that manifest her professional interest in the spiritual

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

2. Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).

3. Thomas Merton, *Choosing to Love the World: On Contemplation*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2008).

4. Thomas Merton, *In My Own Words*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2007).

advice embedded in Merton's correspondence. None of these recurring themes can receive full examination in a review, but I have chosen three to stand out that might offer a potential reader an invitation to make further explorations into Gardner's entire text. These three themes of Merton's practical advice are: clinging to a simple faith in God's mercy; realizing God's will in the unique contours of a personal spiritual life; and maintaining the proper climate of heart and mind to facilitate daily interior prayer and union with God through all vicissitudes, through a human life's patterned flow of ups and downs.

No virtue receives more stress in this compilation than does that of keeping faith. God's presence to one's life is palpable only if one adopts a way of faith, the virtue that is "the basis of all interior prayer" (17 [7 January]). Faith is the lived experience of accepting all the most individual and personal elements of one's life, persons and events for instance, as significant epiphanies of God providential mercy in one's life (19 [15 January]). Only in faith does the desire for God's voice achieve the erotic moments of hearing it: "Faith is the virtue which really puts us in contact with God: the true God, the living God. . . . He is always there, even when He is not felt" (128 [22 October]). These pious truths simply expressed are balanced by Merton's admission that faith provides no easy answers. Faith can never "serve merely as a happiness pill" (138 [18 November]). Merton's assertions about the world in the excerpts of this book default to his habitual responses to his memories of experiencing and interpreting the world as a dark, chaotic and challenging place: "The air of the world is foul with lies, hypocrisy, falsity, and life is short, death approaches" (21 [20 January]). Thus Merton's advice to a correspondent is never overly optimistic: "The times are difficult. They call for courage and faith. Faith is in the end a lonely virtue. Lonely especially where a deeply authentic community of love is not an accomplished fact, but a job to be begun over and over" (145 [1 December]).

Merton's advice on how to know the will of God centers consistently on accepting everything that happens in a person's everyday life as a potential opening to knowing God's will for that person in its particulars: "The concrete existential situation you are in here and now, whatever it is, contains for you God's will, reality. Your only job is to accept it as it is" (15 [2 January]). "You have a concrete situation to face and accept as positively and constructively as possible" (27 [1 February]). The will of God is experienced, not by excessive analysis, but by an attentive listening for the signals of the direction to which the tasks of the day call one forth to love the life you are leading with courage and acceptance. "[W]e have to start from where we are, and respond to grace as we are, within

our own communities and we have to take one step at a time. The main thing is to be ready to refuse nothing when the call really comes, and to be open to each little thing, each new opportunity to make our life more real and less of a systematic and mechanical routine" (41 [7 March]).

In his giving advice on the challenges to practicing interior prayer, Merton can be abrupt. In so many words he can tell his correspondent to relax, shut up and be un-self-conscious, "not thinking about yourself and not trying to figure everything out" (33 [18 February]). The irony here, of course, is that Merton always needed to follow his own advice. Actually, all of Merton's admonitions in this book can be interpreted as his best advice for himself based on his own hard, previous experience: "In our prayer we should avoid everything that makes us uselessly examine and analyze ourselves, and simply go to Him in faith, even if it means that we have to be very patient with a form of prayer that seems dark and arid" (29 [19 February]). Merton on prayer adheres closely to the teachings of the Benedictine John Chapman who advised his readers to "pray as you can, not as you can't." Merton echoes Chapman's advice: "Our interior prayer is simply the most intimate and personal way in which we seek the Face of God" (30 [10 February]). We must learn to pray, in a phrase from Merton's autobiography, "out of the roots of our own life."

Rowan Williams has published a small collection of insightful essays on Merton under the title, *A Silent Action*. In the first essay of the collection he amusingly opines that the monk has become "one of the most wearisomely familiar names in the canon of modern spiritual writing, and the whole industry of Merton Studies has blossomed (if that is the word) and shows no sign of diminution. Indeed, I am busily contributing to it as I write these words."⁵ Fiona Gardner's *Precious Thoughts* is another flowering within that section of the Merton Studies greenhouse that exhibits re-constructed books that mix and match strands from Merton's thinking. These efforts at highlighting Merton's work should not receive uncritical applause, but my own opinion is Maoist in the matter. I prefer to let ten thousand flowers bloom.

After all, I remind myself that probably every month someone in the world is encountering a Merton work for the first time, most likely *The Seven Storey Mountain* or *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Some of these new readers continue to be wowed by Merton's words. A book like *Precious Thoughts* can serve as an invitation for readers with little time now to promise themselves further exploration of the full texts of Merton's letters "when they retire." And then Merton believed in "book

5. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 17.

providence”—the book you need to read falls into your hands at just the right moment of your needing to read it. Who knows the good that a small volume like *Precious Thoughts* will do?

In discerning the value of all the Merton secondary literature (all of it selected perspectives—it could all be called “fabricated”) the market for really useful secondary paths into Merton’s mind will eventually sift out the wheat from the chaff. Unlike Thomas Merton’s original books, some of which appear to bear indefinite expiration dates, the secondary literature is mostly destined for no-longer-in-print oblivion (although James Finley, whose *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere* is headed for its thirtieth anniversary in print, can rightly chuckle at this assertion⁶).

“Without contact with living examples, we soon get lost or give out. We need to be sustained in the interior work that we alone can do, with God’s grace: but still there is need of the push that comes from others who do the same, and who can, in the briefest signals, communicate some of their directions to us” (141 [27 November]). Gardner’s *Precious Thoughts*, her compilation of brief “signals,” provided by one always pushing forward through all his experiences to find his identity with all his relations “in Christ,” will provide “push” and direction for those who choose to linger over her selected texts. Is her compilation further evidence of the continued “blossoming” of Merton Studies, if one can use that word, or is her book yet another epiphany of unwanted weeds in the garden? Who am I to judge? I can only report that, on most pages of this new “fabrication,” this Merton-reading old dog was re-enchanted enough to stop and sniff the roses.

Jonathan Montaldo

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton on Contemplation* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 5 Lectures: 4 CDs); *Finding True Meaning and Beauty* (4 Lectures: 2 CDs); *Thomas Merton’s Great Sermons* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 4 Lectures: 2 CDs); *Vatican II: The Sacred Liturgy and the Religious Life* (7 Lectures: 4 CDs); *Thomas Merton on Sufism* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 13 Lectures: 7 CDs); *Ways of Prayer: A Desert Father’s Wisdom* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 13 Lectures: 7 CDs); *Thomas Merton on the 12 Degrees of Humility* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 16 Lectures: 8 CDs); *Solitude and Togetherness* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 11 Lectures: 11 CDs); *The Prophet’s Freedom* (Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra + 8 Lectures: 8 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).

6. James Finley, *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978).