

multiple perspectives in the area of spiritual biography. It might be one thing to collect sources and conduct interviews but it is another thing to know just what to choose for the balanced telling of a life. Perhaps the greatest gift that Higgins brings to the work is his genius for knowing just what to select. He has achieved that balance.

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ZUERCHER, Suzanne, OSB. *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman known as "M"* (Chicago, IL: In Extenso Press, 2014), pp. 115. ISBN 978-0-87946-997-9 (paper) \$14.95.

In writing what would be her last book, Suzanne Zuercher, OSB drew on a rich blend of resources at her disposal: her own experience of monastic life as a Benedictine nun, skills honed and insights gained during years of practice as a psychotherapist and spiritual director, and years of reading Thomas Merton and reflecting on his life. In addition to many presentations on Merton, Zuercher is the author of *Merton: An Enneagram Profile*¹ as well as *Enneagram Spirituality: From Compulsion to Contemplation*² and *Using the Enneagram in Prayer: A Contemplative Guide*.³

My last communication from Suzanne was in April 2014, just weeks before she died on June 14, 2014. Suzanne wrote to thank me for a blurb I had written for the book. In her email, she repeated what she had written to me earlier and what she also shared in the Introduction to her book: “For some reason I’ve known I must write this book . . . I hope it adds something to a picture of who Merton really was for all of us.” Suzanne’s hope is realized in *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton’s Relationship with the Woman Known as “M”* in which she reflects on a time in Merton’s life when she believes Merton “became incarnate, that is, ‘a spirit in flesh’” (10). In Zuercher’s view, Merton’s relationship with M. “was important, even essential, for him to become a complete human being” (9). Thus, Zuercher reads Merton’s relationship with M. in the context of “Merton’s journey to spiritual wholeness” (102), regarding it as a chapter in a story of “the maturing of a monastic vocation” (101).

The format of the book is innovative and thus risky; however, in Zuercher’s hands, it works well, allowing her to carefully distinguish between

1. Suzanne Zuercher, OSB, *Merton: An Enneagram Profile* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1996).

2. Suzanne Zuercher, OSB, *Enneagram Spirituality: From Compulsion to Contemplation* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992).

3. Suzanne Zuercher, OSB, *Using the Enneagram in Prayer: A Contemplative Guide* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008).

her words and Merton's. Each of the eighteen chapters (only coincidentally the number of the *Eighteen Poems* Merton wrote for "M." during this time) consists of three parts: an "imagined poem" – something Merton might have written; a quotation from Merton – something he actually wrote; and Zuercher's reflection on the poem and the quoted passage. The poems, written in free verse, ring true to Merton's voice – sounding neither forced nor trite. The quotations are mainly from Volume Six of Merton's journals⁴ and from *A Midsummer Diary for M.* included in the volume (*LL* 301-48). There is also a quotation (16) from Merton's essay, "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" published in *Love and Living*⁵ and two excerpts (107, 111) from a letter Merton wrote "To Friends" in 1967, first published in *The Road to Joy*⁶ and more recently in *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*.⁷ The quotations are well-chosen – at once provocative and representative of the texts from which they are taken. In the reflections – most four or five pages long – that complete each chapter, Zuercher takes up "various aspects of [Merton's] love for Margie and his struggle around them" (11). The reflections explore a variety of themes. Some themes pertain to Merton's personal responses to the situation: his vulnerability, self-examination and growing self-awareness; others consider Merton's grappling with such topics as the demands of obedience and the meaning of solitude and the hermit life as he wrestled with the paradox posed by two seemingly contradictory realities, his vocation to solitude and his love for M., and struggled to figure out what each reality required of him.

Zuercher addresses the resulting tension in Chapter VI. A closer look at this chapter will also serve to demonstrate Zuercher's approach. Zuercher's poem begins with these lines:

The surest voice I hear
Is this: I am a monk
Forever.
Lying here in the dark silence
Is another truth: I want her and
I need her. (36)

4. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.

5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 28.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 96-97.

7. Thomas Merton, *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper One, 2008) 321.

Zuercher juxtaposes the imagined poem which she composed with some lines Merton wrote in his journal on May 9, 1966: “A voice says in me – love: do trust love! Do not fear it, do not avoid it, do not take mere half-measures with it, but *love*, believe in it, without any special program, without rebelling against the whole structure of the church, without ignoring or neglecting (or idolizing) concrete obligations which you may have, but *love* within the actual framework where you are and see what comes of it” (37 [LL 57]). It is clear that Merton heard both voices and struggled to reconcile them. In her reflection, Zuercher cites the promises that Merton made as a monk: chastity and “fidelity to the monastic way of life” (*conversatio morum*), noting that now “Merton was faced with the necessity of making a second vocational decision” (37-38). Zuercher reminds readers that Merton was not the only one asking new questions and reassessing his commitments at this time. The 1960s were a time of change and “a number of women and men religious were choosing to leave religious life” (38). Might there be a way to be committed to monastic life and to M.? Could they continue their relationship? How could he and she walk such “a difficult tightrope” (39)? What could he do? – ask for a dispensation perhaps? On May 9, Merton wrote: “I am struck by the fact that the social rules of thumb for handling such situations offer no real structure, no authentic answer, and one cannot begin to make sense of norms!” (39 [LL 54]) (“social rules of thumb” – what an odd turn of phrase in this context!). In this reflection, as in all the others, Zuercher strives to delineate Merton’s “Hamlet-like interior dialogue[s]” (39).

As Zuercher unpacks what Merton wrote, she draws readers’ attention to some particularly revealing passages, noting that “Moments of objectivity and insight occur throughout Merton’s journal and the *Midsummer Diary for M.*” (52) as Merton moves through what Zuercher terms “trackless territory” (31). One such moment occurs in *A Midsummer Diary* where Merton wrote: “The real desert is this: to face the real limitations of one’s own existence and knowledge and not to try to manipulate them or disguise them. Not to embellish them with possibilities. To simply set aside all possibilities other than those that are actually present and real, here and now. And then to choose or not, as one wishes, knowing that no choice is a solution to anything but merely a step further into a slightly changed context of other, very few, very limited, very meaningless concrete possibilities” (45 [LL 309-10]). There were also occasions of candidness and confession such as this: “I have not been either a good monk or a good lover” (80 [LL 334]). Throughout the book, Zuercher makes it clear that Merton was a man of prayer. Zuercher captures this aspect of Merton in a poem – which Merton might have written:

God,
 I need your mercy
 More than anything else.
 I'm trying to be honest,
 But I know myself
 And this other need I have
 Of her.
 Something tells me I'm telling the truth
 To me.
 Something wonders if it's all the truth
 Or if I've buried a piece of it
 From both of you.
 I long for
 And I need
 Your comfort and hers,
 Or maybe I did and now
 I only need yours,
 Coming cloaked in a strength
 I hate to admit.
 What I really need is the whole Truth
 And that is you.
 But most of all I need your mercy
 For those lies
 Deeper than anything else. (72)

Merton's relationship was short-lived. With "A Midsummer Diary for M," written between June 17 and June 24, 1966, Merton was distancing himself from M. even as, paradoxically, he was sharing with her his inmost thoughts in a diary that he planned to give her and in which he affirmed both his vocation to solitude and the reality of their love. "She will be my love but in this absurd and special way: as part of the 'realization' which is solitude" (103 [LL 322]). As fall neared, there were some phone calls to M. and some letters from her. On September 8, 1966, Merton made a commitment, in writing, witnessed by Abbot James Fox, "to live in solitude for the rest of my life" (LL 129). Nevertheless, there were a few more calls in the winter and through the spring. At the end of her last reflection in Chapter XVIII, Zuercher concludes that in the end, it all seems to boil down to the reality for Merton that he likes his life and sees no real reason – not even his love for Margie – to look for anything else, no reason to cut off all ties to his monastery. His monastic vow of stability experienced in his sense of "at-homeness" where he is, echoes

through this passage of May, 1967: “Peace, silence, freedom of heart, no care, quiet joy. Last year – there was joy and turbulence and trouble which turned to confusion and a deeply disturbed heart because I knew I was wrong and was going against everything I lived for. Today I looked up at the tall treetops and the high clouds and listened to the silence – and was very glad indeed to be alone! What idiocy I got into last year” (110 [LL 227]). However, as Zuercher notes, Merton adds: “Still I wonder how she is, and what is developing in her life. I worry a little about her” (110 [LL 227]).

In the Epilogue, Zuercher writes: “this part of Merton’s journal might have looked to some, and even perhaps to me in my earlier, more cursory readings, primarily the tale of a romance. It has, however, turned out for me to be much more than that. It is evident it is the story of a vocation, one that was questioned and, in the questioning, deepened” (112). As such, Merton’s relationship with M. is a significant part of his story but only a part of a story told in the seven volumes of the journals from *Run to the Mountain*⁸ to *The Other Side of the Mountain*.⁹ At the same time, Zuercher takes Merton as his word, and I do too, when he writes: “I cannot regard this as ‘just an episode.’ It is a profound event in my life and one which will have entered deeply into my heart to alter and transform my whole climate of thought and experience: for in her I [now] realize I had found something, someone, that I had been looking for all my life” (104 [LL 328]). The last part of the statement demands a second look for it bears the signature mark of Merton’s accounts of important, even life-changing, experiences of finding what he had been seeking whether he knew it or not.

It is unlikely that this will be the last book on the subject of Merton’s relationship with M. And it is certainly not the first. But Zuercher’s book will continue to be worth reading both for what it reveals about Merton and for the questions it raises about him. Moreover, it is a book that addresses questions of universal human concern – questions such as those of identity, vocation, commitment, fidelity and faith. Thus, while this book is about Merton and M., it is, in a real sense, about all of us. I am grateful to Sister Suzanne Zuercher for the creativity and the sensitivity she brought to this subject as well for the mix of knowledge and wisdom, confidence and humility with which she wrote this book. Readers will not only gain a deeper understanding of Merton’s “journey to spiritual

8. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

9. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

wholeness" (102) but also some insight into their own. Thank you Suzanne. *Requiescat in pace.*

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PADOVANO, Anthony T., *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton*, foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014), pp 200. ISBN 978-1-61636-802-9 (paper) \$16.99.

The re-issue of Anthony T. Padovano's interpretative biography of Thomas Merton is another welcome text available during this centenary year of Merton's birth. Originally published in 1982 by Doubleday under the title *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century*, this re-issue offers the wider audience a stunning analysis of Merton's life seen primarily through his writing, especially his selectively published journals (*The Secular Journal*, *The Sign of Jonas*, *A Vow of Conversation*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*) and his poetry (*Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Cables to the Ace*, *The Geography of Lograire*).

Accolades for the 1982 version remain valid for the 2014 edition. Timothy A. Curtin noted that the approach of Padovano's text is the "reading of the man through his writing" and that the text's greatest strength is "the masterly balance of the paradoxical elements of Merton's character" (*America* [12 June 1982] 467-68). Elena Malits commented that this "may well be the best book on Thomas Merton of the several which have appeared in the last three or four years. . . . [Padovano has] captured the spirit and significance of Thomas Merton" (*Horizons* 10.1 [Spring 1982] 197-98). Jesuit Richard Hauser called the book "provocative," noting that the reader's "effort to process [Padovano's] conclusions leads to an increase in understanding of Merton" (*Merton Seasonal* 10.4 [Autumn 1985] 9). Approached by Franciscan Media thirty-two years after the original publication to revise his text, Padovano has merited firm praise from Paul M. Pearson: this "presentation of Thomas Merton is second to none" (book blurb on 2014 edition).

Degreed in theology and literature, Padovano is the author of more than twenty-five books and three plays. He was the first elected president of CORPUS, an international Catholic Church reform movement promoting an expanded and renewed priesthood of married and single men/women, and one of the founders of Ramapo College in New Jersey, where he is currently a professor of philosophy and literature. Well-prepared to write on Thomas Merton because of his extensive knowledge of the Merton corpus, Padovano presents not only facts of Merton's life and writing, but a comprehensive view of the intellectual and literary history