

prologue but nearly half received little editing, with Waugh commenting: “I find I have bitten off more than my failing teeth can chew” (111).

As the relationship tapers off Coady offers an interesting Epilogue. She sees how Merton’s confidence in his writing grew in the 1950s although he continued to “ponder ambivalently on his life as a writer” (139) and how writing competed and contrasted with his desire for greater solitude and silence. Waugh struggled with ill health and associated depression and felt bitter about the changes the Catholic Church was making. Merton notes in his journal for August 1964 a letter from “a crusty old man called Evelyn Waugh” (142) to the magazine *Commonweal* supporting conservatism; Merton continued “I understand conservatism – he is one of the genuine conservatives: he wishes to conserve not what might be lost but what is not even threatened because it vanished long ago” (142). As Coady insightfully notes, the bohemian Merton would always have clashed at some point with the established order that was essential to Waugh’s world. Yet both men reflect through their writings their search for the absolute and in this they were united.

Fiona Gardner

MOSES, John, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*, Foreword by Rowan Williams (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. xxiii + 242. ISBN 978-1-4411-8062-9 (cloth) \$32.95.

Certain authors possess a magnetism. Their mirroring of our own discontent, our own experience of the human predicament, entralls us. Thomas Merton is one of these authors. John Moses’ *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* is a notable addition to the list of volumes prepared for the centennial of his birth. Moses seeks to understand the fascination we have with Merton, to comprehend his paradoxes, and to perceive his prophetic voice in eight chapters, preceded by a Foreword by Rowan Williams. Moses argues that the all-too-human contradictions and tensions of Merton’s various vocations are forged into a prophetic voice replete with divine discontents.

The opening chapter explores the reasons for our enduring intrigue with Merton. His “compromised but compelling” (20) discipleship entices, drawing the reader to become invested in Merton’s own questions and contradictions. Moses uses this opening chapter to set up the following five, each of which examines one of Merton’s vocations: the call to monasticism, the urge to write, the necessity of contemplation, the responsibility to social criticism and the longing for ecumenical dialogue. While Moses understands these to compete in Merton for time and energy, they simultaneously fructify each other. Moses insists that Merton’s primary

calling was to life as a Trappist monk, which serves as the context, the desert soil, for his other vocations. At the same time, Gethsemani provides the stability and silence necessary for Merton's pursuit of the mystery of God and in doing so gives him the panoramic perspective from which he would offer wisdom to the world.

Moses masterfully weaves together the contradictions and discontents of the many sides of Merton to highlight the manner in which each deepened and enabled the others. For example, Moses argues that Merton's perception of his responsibility to engage the world sits in tension with his chosen life as a Trappist. Thus, while Merton feels compelled to write and is best known for it, contemplation is the real "heartbeat" (89) of his life. The austerity and *kenosis* of the contemplative life, which led Merton to encounter God, also provided him with the perspective and credibility to gain a hearing as a Christian social critic. For Moses, Merton's social criticism is unique precisely as a contribution offered by a *contemplative*. Again, the contradictions are fruitful. Merton's contemplative encounters with Christ functioned as the theological foundations of his criticism and directed him to highlight love as "the key to the meaning of the entire creation" (116) and to insist upon the dignity and freedom of human persons. These thoroughly Christian insights Merton brought to bear on the issues of his time: abuses of power, oppression and discrimination, war and peace, interreligious dialogue. *Divine Discontent* depicts monastic vocation and contemplative life as the impetus for Merton's dialogical quest for the divine. While renouncing all vapid and syncretistic forms of dialogue, Merton's Christological contemplation expanded the horizons of his ecumenism to include non-Christian religions. Ultimately, the shared experience of seeking after the divine led Merton to the East and to his untimely death.

After the comprehensive overview of Merton's many callings, *Divine Discontent* contends that his contradictions cannot adequately account either for the depths of his discontents or the profundity of our enduring intrigue. Thus Moses asks, "Is it the nature of the human condition that he is exposing, or is it something of the truth about himself? Is it a mirror that he is holding up before the reader, or is it a light that he is shining into the depth of his own psyche?" (166). Moses prudently avoids any eisegesis of Merton's writing or psychoanalysis of his mind, allowing Merton and his correspondents to lead the reader to infer that Merton's contradictions do not represent neurosis, but natural human reactions to the problems of life. Yet Moses pushes further, asking whether Merton might be "a study in *divine* discontent" (171) and arguing that Merton's

“long desert of difficulties” experienced in the Abbey of Gethsemani led to “the element of transfiguration that makes it possible to speak of *divine* discontent” (174). Moses leads the reader to ask whether she hears in Merton the voice of one whose encounter with God compels him to give voice to the divine displeasure with the way things are.

The concluding chapter, “A Prophetic Voice” (183-211), asks whether Merton’s desert transfiguration validates the perception of a truly prophetic expression of *divine* discontent in the American monk. Merton, Moses maintains, not only addressed a number of relevant issues, but through them, prophetically identified the dominant crisis of his day: alienation – “men and women’s estrangement from God and from their deepest selves as human beings” (189). Moses concludes that Merton indeed speaks with a prophetic voice, offering evocative images of the theological humanism needed to address alienation. The many faces of Merton, replete with their contradictions and his discontents, may ultimately serve as his credentials “to a world that struggles to come to terms with its persistent and enduring experience of alienation” (211). For those of us who, like John Moses, remain fascinated by Thomas Merton, the credentials remain valid. “The voice continues to be heard” (211).

Throughout, Moses successfully narrates the tensions and mutually supporting accents of Merton’s vocations with Merton’s own words. The image which emerges is not a vapid two-dimensional copy of Merton twisted to fit the author’s pet interests, but the voice of Merton speaking from within his discontents to the world, compelling and challenging as always. *Divine Discontent* is an enjoyable read. One need not be a Merton aficionado to understand the book. Yet, even the most avid Merton reader can benefit from what Rowan Williams describes as a “coherent and comprehensive” (xi) reminder of why Merton still matters.

Although the book is not a difficult read and despite the fact that I agree with Moses that Merton’s voice still matters and might be called prophetic, I am not sure the argument convinced me. Moses does not adequately deal with the problems of Merton’s failures as a monk, most notably the affair with “M.,” which might detract from the claim that he prophetically gives voice to divine discontent. I think the problems could be addressed, but Moses does not do so sufficiently. If Moses did not convince me, Merton did. Since Moses does succeed in letting Merton speak for himself, the prophetic quality of his voice shines through. The world has undergone tremendous change in the nearly five decades since Merton’s death, yet his concerns remain relevant. People remain alienated from God, from each other, and from themselves. War remains

a global problem. Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue could go a long way to easing strife and building peace. *Divine Discontent* is a welcome reminder of the wisdom and challenge of Merton's voice, a voice whose discontents we'd be wise to heed.

Joshua Brumfield

PRAMUK, Christopher, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), pp. xii + 138. ISBN 978-0-8146-4816-2 (paper) \$17.95.

Christopher Pramuk describes *At Play in Creation* as a "crystallization" (x) of his widely acclaimed volume, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* – an illuminating and ground-breaking study of Merton's sapiential Christological vision.¹ In 2011, The International Thomas Merton Society recognized the publication of *Sophia* by awarding Christopher Pramuk a "Louie" for "bringing provocative insight and fresh direction to Merton Studies." Pramuk characterizes *At Play in Creation* as a collection of "retreat conferences" (x). As such, each chapter, although integral to the book as a whole, is nevertheless complete in itself. Reading the chapters and ruminating on each – one by one – would be very much in sync with Pramuk's conception of the essays as conferences. The somewhat conversational tone of the book, which grew out of presentations in a host of settings – retreats, workshops and the like, is engaging and invites reflection and dialogue with the text. The sense that one is hearing Pramuk speak is enhanced by his interjection of personally revelatory anecdotes about his family as well as his sharing of the story of his own encounters and engagement with Merton's writings. Built on a foundation of a deep and meticulous scholarship, the book is guaranteed to delight readers across the spectrum – those new to Merton and those deeply immersed in his writings.

At Play in Creation is as appealing in appearance as it is profound in content. The cover, printed on textured card stock enhanced by French flaps, features an ink drawing by Thomas Merton entitled "Christ Unveils the Meaning of the Old Testament" that visually illustrates the subtitle, *Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine*. The cover image appears again in the book, along with three additional Merton ink drawings, a photo of the young Tom Merton peeking out from behind a door and a haunting photo of Etty Hillesum. These images alternate with carefully chosen epigraphs to draw the reader into the book's chapters. The back

1. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).