

BEAUTIFUL GARDENS, SHIMMERING POOLS

Review of

Thomas Merton

Thoughts on the East

With an Introduction by George Woodcock

New York: A New Directions Bibelot, 1995

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Cyrus Lee

Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom

Foreword & Afterword by Robert E. Daggy

Erie, Pennsylvania: Sino-American Institute, 1995

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Reviewed by **Gary Young, CR**

In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama, the resounding contemporary voice of Buddhism, pays an outstanding tribute to Thomas Merton, acknowledging the American's understanding of the spirituality of the East and the Trappist's personification of the "real meaning of the word 'Christian.'" One of the amazing gifts Merton brought to contemporary religion was his intuitive, but studied, appreciation of the East-West dialogue. Perhaps a greater gift Merton possessed can be described as the role of *introducer*. In Kentucky parlance, Merton did not know a stranger. His entire adult life celebrated encounter.

Thoughts on the East is an anthology of Merton's writings about the Orient, joined by defining essays by the late George Woodcock to whom New Directions dedicates this book. (In 1978, Farrar, Straus & Giroux published Woodcock's *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet*. Woodcock's introductory essay for this anthology ("Thomas Merton and the Monks of Asia") is a brilliant light on the contents authored by Merton. It is an honest *assay* of Merton's limitations as an Orientalist but does make the point of Merton's openness and accessibility, which produced dialogues such as those treasured by the Dalai Lama. Woodcock's other essay in the volume is "Varieties of Buddhism" — an aid to Merton readers who may be confused about terminology taken from *The Asian Journal*. Woodcock's mark on the contents deserves the credit the dedication reveals.

This New Directions "Bibelot" is small — less than 100 pages — but the quality of Eastern thought does not require quantity. (The size fits a coat pocket and makes good laundromat reading.) The range of subjects, however, is extensive: Taoism, Hinduism, Sufism, and Buddhism, including Zen. Devotees of Merton will note that his selections have been culled from several of his popular titles.

Beyond what the Dalai Lama infers, Merton's comprehension of Eastern thought bears fruit in his ability to explain its various facets to us of the West. It would be interesting to discover how many of Merton's students followed him into an exploration of the topics mentioned above because Merton's clarity held the doors open for them. The poet Merton entertains and teaches us with such treats as "Confucius and the Madman," "Readings from Ibn Abbad," and "Where is Tao?"

Merton's last lines in this little book describe very well its quality: "The whole thing is very much a Zen garden, a span of bareness and openness and evidence, and the great figures, motionless, yet with the lines in full movement, waves of vesture and bodily form, a beautiful and holy vision."

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Scholars often wrestle with ideas at the expense of their perception gained by humor at one level and joy at an even higher level. As Cyrus Lee reminds us, Chuang Tzu promoted wisdom, not only by meditating aloud at a delightful display of fish, but by his witty repartee with Hui Tzu by Hao River. In Lee's newly-published *Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom*, he amplifies the delight in wisdom with his darting glimpses of Thomas Merton's attachment to and contribution to the schooling of the West with the philosophy of the Orient.

As Cyrus Lee contemplates the Pool of Wisdom, he speaks of the joy of the Merton School. Lee speaks as a teacher from the East explaining the comparison of Merton to the Eastern sages; and he speaks as a Westerner, like Merton, desirous of revealing the universal quality of Wisdom as she radiates in all directions.

Each section of the Lee's collection of essays is like a flashing fish, escaping the hook, but delighting the mind and spirit. We are invited by the author and Robert E. Daggy, the eminent Merton scholar who wrote the Foreword, to squat down beside them and feel the splashes of experience refreshing them. (They remind us in their photo on page 116 that they will be our guardian spirits if the Merton material eludes our grasp. They are not unlike Hui Tzu and Chuang Tzu when together.)

Lee's unabashed devotion to Merton does not distort the value of his perception. Like many disciples of Merton, he is able to posit his master among other great teachers and appreciate the exchange of their lights. Thus we behold Merton within a net which also holds Chuang Tzu, Hanshan, D. T. Suzuki, and Mo Tzu. John Wu, Sr., the transplanted Merton scholar, Lee's father-figure and Merton's friend, takes an honored place in this remarkable catch.

The author's style insists that we likewise be impressed with Merton's familiarity with and gratitude to the East, especially China. Merton's seeming-ease with translation affirms Lee's pleasure with the American monk's affinity with Chinese thought and expression. In this book, subjectivity has the reins without losing the object of the study. And, if Cyrus Lee wishes to continue this line of thinking, many of us would be grateful for an extensive anthology containing Merton's own observations juxtaposed with those from the East who had his attention, including the Dalai Lama.

One of the brilliant qualities of the present book is the infusion of Merton's ideas into present Chinese culture. Due to Lee's efforts, the Christian monk is introduced to a vast nation desirous of such bridge builders as Merton — and Lee! It would be correct to say that Cyrus Lee is Thomas Merton's Boswell in China.

Two outstanding Chinese characters are Cyrus Lee and John Wu, Jr., as many participants in Merton conferences will attest. Their lively exchanges focused before audiences have given many Merton scholars a lesson about *not* gilding the image of Merton. The stereotype of Chinese decorum gives way to a playfulness, which is a tribute to their ancestors as well as Merton. In the same spirit, Cyrus's recollections of his dreams hosting Merton and his creative little dialogues, based on conjectures, deliver a wise man's study from pedantry. Any people deciding that Chinese wisdom is beyond them, and avoiding this book for that reason, will miss watching the ideas and experiences of Cyrus Lee leap out of the Hao while Merton is feeding them.

I take the happy liberty of putting words of Merton into Cyrus Lee's mouth: "This book is not intended to prove anything or to convince anyone of anything that he [she] does not want to hear about in the first place." I also take the liberty of paraphrasing Merton: I simply like Cyrus Lee because he is what he is and I feel no need to justify this liking . . . This book shimmers with silver and gold if the reader stirs the pool.

Lee kneels by the Hao
For a glimpse of Merton.
Splash! Splash! In both eyes!