

Growing Toward Wholeness

Review of

Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination

By Ross Labrie

Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001

263 pages / \$34.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Readers of Thomas Merton have long known about Merton's fascination with William Blake, both his poetry and his radical vision of Christianity. One has only to read Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* or Michael Higgins' *Heretic Blood* to gain valuable insight into Blake's life-long influence on Merton. Ross Labrie, however, has chosen to offer us two giant steps further into Merton's spiritual development. By probing the roots of both romanticism and mysticism revealed in Merton's writing, Labrie argues that Merton's fascination with these two domains of intellectual and spiritual thought brought Merton to a coherent, holistic vision – what Labrie calls an “inclusive imagination.”

To establish his argument, Labrie offers us eight chapters of extensive references to Merton's ever-evolving thinking. One can enjoy this book as an extended argument or dip into selected chapters as free-standing essays. Written in academic prose, with each chapter exploring two concepts (e.g. “Consciousness and Being,” “Solitude and the Self,” “Myth and Culture”), this work could be daunting to the casual Merton reader. Yet, each chapter follows a conscious structure that, once recognized, unlocks Labrie's method of exposition: the first concept is explained with multiple quotations gleaned from Merton's literary essays, poetry, journals, and working notebooks, then illustrated at length through a poem or excerpt from an essay; a short transition paragraph serves as segue into the second concept, which is elucidated according to the same pattern; finally a few concluding paragraphs – worth reading twice – draw the connections between the concepts.

While pairs of concepts might seem to be a curious organization of ideas, the author comments that Merton himself often paired contrasting or complementary topics for exploration (e.g. “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” “Atlas and the Fat Man,” “Art and Freedom”) (231). Consciously or unconsciously, Labrie, in following this same strategy of “pairing,” is, like Merton, creating a “charged field” in which to explore Merton's preoccupation with various ideas that led him to a deep belief in the fundamental coherence of human experience.

One obvious richness of this text is Professor Labrie's thorough knowledge of British and American romanticism. The text abounds with allusions to Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, as well as Poe, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Dickinson. Overwhelming as these multiple literary references might seem, the reader need not have read these authors extensively to understand the

Monica Weis, SSJ is professor of English at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY. She speaks and writes extensively on Thomas Merton and Nature, has served as ITMS board member and vice president, and was Program Chair for the ITMS Fourth General Meeting.

connections Labrie is making.

In Chapter 1, "Romanticism and Mysticism," Labrie traces Merton's love of romanticism, especially the poets Blake and Wordsworth, not only for their intuition of wholeness, but for their rejection of industrialism in favor of medievalism (9). Looking at the "intimate, that is, ontological sources of life" (3), these British romantics, Merton realized, used imagination to intuit and meditate on the supernatural. But because Blake was both poet and mystic, Merton early on began to see connections to mysticism in the "sermons of Meister Eckhart, the *Confessions*, the *Sermons on the Psalms* of St. Augustine, the *Rule* of St. Benedict, the Bhagavad Gita, and Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*" (18). A contemplative understanding leads to an experience of intimacy between the soul and God (26). Merton's attraction to both romanticism and mysticism awakened Merton to "an idealized reality . . . centered on unity and wholeness" (27) and a deepening sense that one could "find other worlds *in* this one, worlds that one could not only think about but also live in" (28-29).

Chapter 2, "Consciousness and Being," explores Merton's "allergy to the legacy of Cartesianism" (31) and his attraction to Eckhart and Zen Buddhism for their affinity for transcendent thought and contemplative intuition, making the case for Merton as a Christian existentialist. Chapter 3, "Solitude and the Self," focuses on solitude as Act, which helps one distinguish between illusion and reality and thus discover the essential goodness of the self. Chapter 4, "Nature and Time," illustrates how Merton's Franciscan attraction to landscape enables him to experience time as not merely linear, but as an evolutionary whole. Chapter 5, "Paradise and the Child's Vision," grounds Merton's paradisaical experiences (e.g. Fourth and Walnut) in biblical literature and links them to the imaginative power and inner freedom of the child. Chapter 6, "The Imagination and Art," highlights the imagination's ability to bring together into "primordial unity" that which had become fragmented, and celebrates the monk's role as both seer and maker (163). Chapter 7, "Myth and Culture," invites the reader into *The Geography of Lograire* to discover Merton's interest in the multicultural myths underlying religion, and his unique ability to view reality through his European-Latin American-Asian lens.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, is both a free-standing essay and a concluding statement on Merton's inclusive imagination. In "Individuation, Unity, and Inclusiveness," Labrie argues that Merton's attraction to the desert fathers – countercultural revolutionaries of their time – grounded Merton's move to the hermitage and his prolific output on social justice themes. Furthermore, the author states, Merton's interest in Zen Buddhism approximates the spiritual and mystical unity of the medieval mystics and embraces both Eastern and Western thought because it transcends the Cartesian split between subject and object. Similarly, Merton's respect for Thoreau as a bridge-builder between East and West and Merton's belief in the underlying being that unites all traditions, enabled Merton to resist cultural xenophobia and recognize the "invisible fecundity" present in all things. Whereas Thomistic philosophy once marginalized romanticism and mysticism from traditional Roman Catholicism, Merton now returns to both romanticism and mysticism to discover and live out the fundamental coherence they offer.

Labrie's book is not for the faint of heart, yet is richly rewarding for its spectrum of references to Merton's letters, notebooks, literary essays, poems, and journals. In the absence of a concordance to Merton's works and in this time of anticipation of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Labrie's text offers a welcome compendium of Merton's inclusive imagination by focusing on key concepts of his thought and writing.