

Exploring the Bridge that is Poetry

Review of

Walking with Thomas Merton:

Discovering His Poetry, Essays, and Journals

By Robert Waldron

New York: Paulist Press, 2001

xviii + 117 pages / \$8.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Brenda Fitch Fairaday**

At the outset of this little book, the author tells us that he hopes the reader will get to know Merton and “allow him to be a friend,” assisting us on our “journey to holiness / wholeness” (3). Certainly a noble objective. The book is actually the author’s journal of his preparation to give a retreat; the reader therefore becomes privy to the author’s own re-journeying through Merton’s works as he carefully chooses texts which he hopes will enlighten his retreatants. As he reads each work again, he remarks on certain times in Merton’s life which in some way coincide with the text at hand; other times he introduces Merton’s correspondents as they discuss a text or subject. When he speaks of Merton’s interest in Zen Buddhism and his writing of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, for instance, the author notes the parallels – and non-parallels – between Merton’s and Alan Watts’ fascination with the subject (54). He remarks on his own response to Merton’s *Mystics and Zen Masters*, and that Buddhism has taught him much about the process of self-emptying and “the vital role of attention in the spiritual life” (55). This is the theme he comes back to again and again: attentiveness to the text enriches the mind, heart and spirit.

An English teacher for thirty-one years, Waldron has obviously taught many students to look deeply into a poetic text, and it is Merton’s poetry which is his chief objective in the summer’s exercise of choosing. Attention to a word is necessary for understanding any text, any genre; however, poetry has more layers than most, and paying attention to a poetic text is rather like going through the layers of the earth’s crust in search of its core. Poetry has always been known as the medium that can express the deepest thoughts and feelings in the fewest words. Waldron admits that Merton was not among the foremost company of poets, but what is recognized is the fact that for Merton, writing poetry was a necessity: making poetry helps one find the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious. One’s poetry becomes both the bridge and the revealer of the self, whether the true or the false self. On Waldron’s summer journey we meet many who influenced Merton (Robert Lax, Denise Levertov, Albert Camus, T. S. Eliot, Rilke, Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins) or who were influenced by him.

Brenda Fitch Fairaday, a resident of New York City, is founder of the ITMS chapter at Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan and was chairman of the Thomas Merton Conferences at Corpus Christi. A graduate of Union Theological Seminary, she teaches at the Center for Spiritual Development of the New York Archdiocese and has taken Judaic studies at Jewish Theological Seminary. She has given retreats and classes on Thomas Merton and Thérèse of Lisieux, among others, often emphasizing their poetry. Her article, “Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Voice: Merton, Heschel, and Vatican II,” will appear in the forthcoming *Thomas Merton and Judaism* (Fons Vitae). She is also a professional singer, appearing with New York City Opera and San Francisco Opera, among others.

The reader is also taken through nearly every major experience Merton ever had, from his birth to his death, and while this interleaving of his life with his writings is valuable, often helpful for understanding where a subject or work originated, it is also a bit frustrating to keep coming around in circles, as the author is ever ready to repeat himself. Some portions stand out in the midst of all the meandering: the author's letter to Thomas Merton (43-45) is worth reading first as it gives the reader a clear statement of the author's reasons for his summer study and his feelings toward his subject; his discussion of Faulkner's "The Bear" (57) and Merton's lecture on tape about its application to the spiritual search is enlightening. However, it is easy to become impatient with so many personal notes: as a journal it is appropriate to make note of the annoying lawnmower, the skunk in the basement, and other everyday things such as the rain. As a book that purports to walk the reader through Merton's opus, one does not need to read the frequent plugs for the author's other books, his worries about the number signed up – or not signed up – for his retreat, the fifth mention of Merton's experience in St. Francis Church in Havana, Merton's early and late falls from grace for the fourth or sixth time. It is in the nature of journalizing to reveal one's inner self; but this book is meant to be a walk with Thomas Merton, not with the author; it would have been appropriate to cut down on the references to the author's own inner journey. More judicious trimming would have been welcome.

A moment must be taken, also, to lay some fault at the feet of the editor – or perhaps the publisher – for the number of misspellings of proper names (did they not have a fact-checker?) and the misuse of tenses: Merton was baptized at Corpus Christi Church (14); it was to Father George Ford that Merton went on that rainy day in 1938, but it was Father Joseph Moore who instructed him and received him into the Church in baptism (64); the editor of the Merton-Milosz correspondence is Robert Faggen (misspelled in both footnote and bibliography); when the author speaks of reading in *A Search for Solitude*, the footnote should give that reference, not the reference in *The Intimate Merton* where it can also be found (32, n.18); the grammar-check or spell-check of a computer program cannot give the difference between past, past perfect, and pluperfect – the editor should know it (49); Merton's hermitage did not have its own telephone when he lived there (17); Merton's Sufi correspondent Abdul Aziz deserves to have his name spelled correctly (23); the International Thomas Merton Society should be spelled out completely at least once, especially in the acknowledgements. Being a journal, one can expect some inaccuracies and abbreviations as well as hyperbole and judgmental statements, but some things ought to be corrected by the publisher or editor before being printed since the printed word gives authority.

These caveats aside, the book does give some helpful guiding principles and nuggets worthy of consideration. The author's spiritual insights can be pondered fruitfully, i.e., on emptiness (19 and elsewhere); methods of personal prayer (22); the stripping away of the false self (62-63); attention to the Holy Now (throughout). As a guide for the perplexed newcomer to Merton, this book could be helpful in locating the milestones in Merton's progress. Those who already have their Merton walking shoes on will probably be better off with William Shannon's *Something of a Rebel* or *Silent Lamp*. On the other hand, Waldron's earlier book *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton* may be just the book for exploring the bridge that is poetry.

"All my life I have turned to the 'beautiful bare text' . . . my reading has become my *lectio divina*" (82), Waldron says. Just as Merton transformed his reading into sacred activity, through the gift that is poetry Waldron would take us on a journey toward sapiential reading, toward the meaning not only of the text but of life.