Paying Attention to a Master

Review of
Thomas Merton: Master of Attention – An Exploration of Prayer
By Robert Waldron
Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008
ix + 101 pages / $16.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Mary R. Somerville**

The stated purpose of Robert Waldron's most recent Merton book is two-fold: "first, to offer a new perspective of Merton and his prayer life, second, to encourage people not to give up on prayer," which is "available to all of us, if we would only pay attention" (7). The focus on attention comes from Simone Weil: "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (2). Author of three prior Merton books, *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul* (1994), *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton* (2000), and *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering his Poetry, Essays and Journals* (2002), Waldron is well versed in the material he presents. As a long-time English teacher and retreat leader, he knows how to hook readers, especially those just starting to savor Merton and the contemplative life.

Waldron's approach is less scholarly and in-depth than enthusiastic and kaleidoscopic. This approach works best when he focuses on literature (George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Czeslaw Milosz, Aldous Huxley) and prayer (Simone Weil, Meister Eckhart, Merton's own writings). The book's first half offers a brief biography and an introduction to Merton's growing attentiveness to the divine through art, poetry, nature and *lectio divina*. Comparisons with Hopkins and Weil are effected by use of parallelism and lists: "Both [Merton and Weil] were born in France. . . . Both were cared for by Doctor Tom Bennett: as a guardian to Merton, as a doctor to Weil" (43).

Less successful is the second half's broad-brush treatment of Merton's calligraphy and photography, and his romance with a nurse. Some statements are over-zealous: "By the mid-1960s, Merton had become one of America's leading authorities on Zen (along with Alan Watts)" (63). In *Merton and Buddhism*, John P. Keenan states in "The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism": "In the 1960s, in this culture, it was D. T. Suzuki and his western companion Alan Watts who were the popularly authoritative voices on Zen" (*Merton and Buddhism* 121-22). Waldron further asserts that "While drawing, Merton seemingly entered a Zen No Mind" (64). I doubt that Merton would have ascribed that exalted state to himself, though he did call his camera "a Zen camera."

Waldron's Jungian analysis of Merton, previously explored in *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul*, resurfaces here in some forced conclusions. For example, Waldron fails to find the humor in Merton's musings on how Victor Hammer might respond to his calligraphy (in *A Vow of Conversation*): "I feel like writing to him and saying: 'If you heard I had taken a mistress, you would be sad but you would understand. These drawings are perhaps worse than that, but regard them as a human folly. Allow me, like everyone else, at least one abominable vice'" (68-69). Instead, Waldron employs heavy-handed analysis: "What is truly sad about this entry is that Merton permits the opinion of another to dim his

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shining moment as a calligrapher" (69). A little further on, he says, "Merton fortunately transcends his anxiety about Hammer (Freud's theory that fathers and sons must separate). . ." (69). Roger Lipsey comes to a far different conclusion in *Angelic Mistakes*, when citing another irreverent Merton passage on the drawings:

> This is the sound of Merton – apologetic, assertive, self-deprecating, funny, reflective – as he began what would prove to be a long new venture in visual art. The ambivalence would last for years, not because he seriously doubted the good quality and even goodness of his art but for other reasons. He had gone out on a limb; he was, as a visual artist, well away from the mighty trunk of the Catholic Church. Further, he was a faithful and experienced monk, not given to tooting his own horn. And, perhaps most important, he had surprised himself (*Angelic Mistakes* 6).

Writing about calligraphy and photography without providing illustrations, as Waldron does, is like offering the menu without the food. One has only to savor the richness of *Angelic Mistakes*, with all its substance and print images, to see what's missing here.

Waldron's final chapter, "Love and Do What You Will," is especially sweeping in its connection of Merton's romance and his final, Asian journey. Love of the nurse, while of great import in Merton's spiritual journey, does not quite fit the book's stated focus on prayer and attention, and the "huge leap forward" (87) from the nurse to Merton's experience of the Polonnaruwa Buddhas feels just that. (One minor quibble: Catherine Spalding's name is misspelled twice, on pages 68 and 69.)

In summary, Waldron's focus on Merton as a master of attention works better in the first half when he deals with specific poems or passages on contemplation. In the last part, when he veers off into conjecture and too-quick psychological analyses, especially in his treatment of Merton's art, he falls short. On the plus side, given prevailing short attention spans (pardon the pun) the book's brevity may appeal to fledgling Merton readers desiring an introduction rather than a bible, and hopefully will spur them on to more in-depth treatments. For veteran Merton readers, however, the book covers too much ground too quickly, with the result that it reads more like a pastiche than a panorama.