

Psyching Out Merton

Review of
The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton
 By Robert Waldron
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Reviewed by **Thomas Sheridan**

In his review of *A Book of Hours* by Thomas Merton, edited by Kathleen Deignan, Bishop Robert Morneau writes: “Can yet another book on Merton be justified? Are we not ‘Mertoned’ out? Kathleen Deignan would argue to the contrary” (*Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 42.4 [2007] 483). Herein I will “argue” that Robert Waldron’s seriously flawed book ill serves both its subject and his theoretic rationale, Jungian psychology. And whereas Morneau concurred with Deignan I will argue that Waldron’s book is not “justified.” In his Preface Waldron states:

The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton is a Jungian interpretation of the life and work of Trappist monk Thomas Merton. I consider myself qualified to write such a book because I have studied Jungian theory most of my adult life. As far as Thomas Merton is concerned, I have been reading and studying him ever since I read his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, during my junior year in high school in the early 1960s.

I do not claim or pretend to be a psychiatrist, psychologist, or therapist. I admire the man Thomas Merton and his writings, and in my attempts to understand him more as a man, a monk, a priest, and an artist, I have found that Carl Jung’s theory of individuation has, over the years, shed much light on Merton and his work, allowing me to understand more fully the origin, the vicissitudes, and the hard-won insights of his spiritual journey. Thus, let me announce loudly and clearly that I am offering readers my interpretation of Merton’s life and work, employing Jungian theory as my guidepost and paradigm. . . . I have, after years of reading and studying his

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life, won for myself what I believe is a deeper, more whole understanding of his life and his goals as a Religious and as an artist. (vii-viii)

I confess to being perplexed at Waldron's tone of near-sublime confidence at the challenging project he proposes whilst noting a total lack of clinical training. There are quite gifted autodidacts but Waldron's unquestioning faith in his bona fides appears misplaced.

A useful method to situate Waldron's flawed perspective is, simply put, his uncritical attitude to his own perspective. All knowledge is perspectival, i.e., anchored in a knowledge base with personal, historical backgrounds and biases. To this end Abraham Maslow's concept of psychological isomorphism is relevant: "My general thesis is that many of the communication difficulties between persons are the byproduct of communication barriers within the person; and that communication between the person and the world, to and fro, depends largely on their isomorphism (i.e., similarity of structure and form); that the world can communicate to a person only that of which he is worthy, that which he deserves or is 'up to'; that to a large extent he can receive from the world, and give to the world, only that which he himself is" (*The Psychology of Science: A Reconnaissance* [1967] 134).

Central to Carl Jung's theory and practice of psychotherapy was the need to explicate the potential hazards of clinical isomorphism:

Personal and theoretical prejudices are the most obvious obstacles in the way of psychological judgment. They can however be eliminated with a little good will and insight. Freud himself accepted my suggestion that every doctor should submit to a training analysis before interesting himself in the unconscious of his patients for therapeutic purposes. All intelligent psychotherapists who recognize the need for conscious realization of unconscious aetiological factors agree with this view. Indeed it is sufficiently obvious, that what the doctor fails to see in himself he will either not see at all, or will see grossly exaggerated in his patient. . . . Just as one rightly expects the surgeon's hands to be free from infection, so one ought to insist with especial emphasis that the psychotherapist be prepared at all times to exercise adequate self-criticism, a necessity which is all the more incumbent upon him when he comes up against insuperable resistances in the patient which may possibly be justified. He should remember that the patient is there to be treated and not to verify a theory. (*The Practice of Psychotherapy* [1966] 115)

It is inarguable that Waldron has made a "case study" out of Merton's life and acts upon it as if he were a psychologist. Thus, it is essential to approach Waldron as a psychiatric clinician, not withstanding his prefatory disclaimers. Occasionally Waldron does not employ

his Jungian scholarship. In Chapter One he correctly emphasizes the Jungian concept of the “psychologically androgynous” nature of the person. Subsequently, however, this seminal concept is essentially misapplied. Waldron creates – at the start – a fictional case history wherein, without restraint, he psychologizes Merton’s history as if he were both child and family therapist. It is clear that Waldron approaches Merton’s life with an unquestioned and assertive clinical frame of reference. In the course of his “analysis” Waldron subjects his fictional Merton to the author’s “expertise” in child psychology, family systems theory, psychosomatic medicine, literary theory and mind-reading.

The book is divided into ten chapters, the first four of which address Merton’s history through his entry to Gethsemani. Waldron’s many psychological assessments draw on Merton’s journals, essays, poems, dreams and books. Chapters Five through Ten consider Merton’s journey through mid-life to his death, again employing his interpretive model. Notwithstanding certain perspectival differences it must be noted that Waldron wished to clarify the deeply human, frequently messy yet always courageous nature of Merton’s story. His narrative prohibits idealizing or romanticizing Merton. And I strongly suspect that he would concur with Jung when he writes:

When one follows the path of individuation, when one lives one’s own life one must take mistakes into the bargain; life would not be complete without them. There is no guarantee – not for a single moment that we will not fall into error or stumble into deadly peril. We may think there is a sure road. But that would be the road of death. Then nothing happens any longer – at any rate, not the right things. Anyone who takes the sure road is as good as dead. (*Memories, Dreams, Reflections* [1961] 297)

A priest-professor friend recently called me about Waldron’s book. He had loaned his copy to a colleague undergoing distress. Upon returning the book he noted that the book had deeply “encouraged” him with his own suffering.

Waldron wastes no time in employing his revisioned Jungian concepts. Addressing the death of Merton’s mother, he avers that “With his mother absent, so is absent the feminine and all that the feminine implies: physical security, affection, human touch, attention, emotional security, and motherly nurturing, even though hers was stinting” (9). This is hyperbole of the first order – as if after his mother’s death the child Merton were deposited in a solitary underground cave. For the first of innumerable occasions, Waldron wrongly identifies the feminine dimension with a woman or women. Jungian theory robustly opposes this oversimplification, emphasizing the genetic gender dimensions of the feminine (*anima*) archetypal features of males and the corresponding masculine (*animus*) features of females. As Jung put it, “No man is so entirely masculine that he has nothing feminine in him. . . . Apart from the influence of woman there is also the man’s own femininity to

explain the feminine nature of the soul – complex” (*Two Essays on Analytic Psychology* [1966] 189). Though Waldron recognizes this (see 9-10), he does not apply it consistently in his presentation.

In the course of a lengthy discourse on a dream of Merton’s (03/10/1964) Waldron writes: “Although a positive dream, there is a negative side. Merton remains not completely comfortable with the feminine aspects of his personality, The cloister is symbolic of the psyche; there is still no place for the feminine within a cloister, which prohibits the presence of women” (84). I recall my artist wife’s initial impressions upon her first and only visit to Gethsemani to meet with Fr. Matthew Kelly, friend and confessor. She remarked, “I never imagined that there would be such beauty, balance and serenity.” Beauty is a reliable marker of the feminine presence per se, and is gender-free.

Without restraint Waldron interprets a single sentence from *The Seven Storey Mountain* thusly: “Merton is surely engaged in a classic case of psychological projection onto his young remembered self. Why would he feel so negatively about himself? Could it be that he felt that he himself was the *cause*, first of his mother’s death of cancer, secondly his father’s death of the same disease?” (17). Waldron’s cavalier use of Jungian terms lacks the depth essential to their being more than mere intellectual jargon. For example, the Jungian system does not denote the kind of heroic, volitional authority Waldron attributes to the “ego.” Quite the contrary, Jung portrayed the ego as a rather relative, never “in-charge” agency. It is always part conscious and unconscious, ever laboring to attain an ever challenged “authority,” and needful to coordinate with the Self, the Christ-archetype of wholeness. It is ever balancing and must indispensably coordinate with the archetypes of the Collective Unconscious, particularly Hermes (or Mercurius) which Waldron ignores.

Merton’s brilliant essay, “Herakleitos the Obscure” (1960) echoes Jung’s image of the psyche in a manner foreign to Waldron’s book. It needs to be noted that Merton was reading Jung as early as 1939 and that Jung admired Herakleitos, frequently alluding to his importance. Merton notes: “[Herakleitos] spoke for the mysterious, the unutterable, and the excellent. He spoke for the logos which was the true law of all being – not a static and rigid form, but a dynamic principle of harmony-in-conflict. . . . [O]ur happiness depends on the harmony-in-conflict that results from this awakening. . . . True peace is the ‘hidden attunement of opposite tensions’ – a paradox and a mystery transcending both sense and will” (*Behavior of Titans* 76).

Waldron’s portrayal of the persona is especially inept – but consistent with his revisioned image of the Jungian psyche as being a chess board wherein he moves all the pieces at will. The persona, as Jung put it, is a “concession” to reality, a necessary developmental adaptation to the world. Its archetypal (i.e., of the collective unconscious) role ought not be seen as an inferior, or a manipulative figure, as Waldron views it. Nor does it fit Waldron’s view that it is volitionally employed as a False Self.

I will conclude this section by citing several statements which denote Waldron's unique perspective on Merton. This perspective was addressed in a paper by Sigmund Freud (1911) entitled, "Wild Psychoanalysis," whereby the behavior of a doctor who had not been psychoanalytically trained invoked the authority of psychoanalysis while delivering opinionated (and unhelpful) advice. Waldron comments on a retrospective journal entry of Merton's (10/22/1952):

Not addressing his mental state (perhaps unqualified to do so), his family doctor (a general practitioner) diagnoses a case of severe gastritis, bordering on ulcers. . . . Today, of course, an astute doctor would have advised psychological therapy as quickly as possible, as well as a referral to a psychiatrist. As for his gastritis, we today know enough about psychosomatic illness to understand that Merton's physical problems quite possibly reflected a disturbed mind and soul. He was suffering from existential angst and from guilt (likely the guilt of fathering and abandoning his child). (31)

"Merton is likely attracted to asceticism perhaps because he has so often been the victim of his own concupiscence" (34). The latter comment reductionistically posits guilt-induced masochism as a primary motive for Merton's monastic vocation and thereby largely nullifies the role of grace in his calling.

It is in the reckless manner whereby Waldron approaches Merton's dreams that his project betrays both Merton's courage and creativity and the essentials of Jungian theory. For the latter the psyche is God and gods suffused. Waldron's schema permits him to dissect and free-associate in the selfsame utterly assured manner both to Merton's dreams and his poetry. Nowhere is Merton's actual, embodied existence more caricatured. Merton's journey is ostensibly depicted as a hero's journey toward individuation whereby he masters a curriculum that included ego, shadow, person(ae), true and false selves, *anima* figures, but neglects their interplay, and their rootedness in a sacred world. Waldron desacralizes the psyche in a manner akin to only the most orthodox Freudian psychoanalyst.

As my mentor, James Hillman writes:

Archetypal psychology can put its idea of psychopathology into a series of nutshells, one inside the other: within the affliction is a complex, within the complex, which in turn refers to God. Afflictions point to Gods; Gods reach us through afflictions. Jung's statement – the Gods have become diseases; Zeus no longer rules Olympus but rather the solar plexus, and produces curious specimens for the consulting room. . . . Our pathologizing is their work, a divine process working in the human soul. (*Revisioning Psychology* [1975] 184)

At times Waldron's reductionist approach borders on the frivolous. In his analysis of Merton's poem "The Anatomy of Melancholy," Waldron arbitrarily intermingles his associations as though it were his poem. Waldron's analysis includes among his associations one regarding Dom Sortais (Abbot General), along with Bishop Sheen, and notes that "His first abbot had permitted Merton to wear the mask of writer, as a Catholic apologist at the forefront of Catholic spiritual writing" (121). And then: "It so happened that Merton's 'writer's mask' became as famous as Sheen's. Although he made a great amount of money for the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton, having taken a vow of poverty, had no personal bank account for his royalties. It all went into the Abbey's coffers" (121). At one point in his "associations" to the poem (at the five-page mark) Waldron pauses: "How else may we apply the poem to Merton's life?" (124). Is this any way to "treat" poetry, a work of art? This explicit exploitative attitude is no rare moment throughout Waldron's book; it is merely the most explicitly self-serving. Nowhere does Waldron refer to any literary or poetic theorists. Nor does he pause and indicate the need to recalibrate his manner or approach to a poem as distinct from dreams, journals and life story. For there is herein no story of Thomas Merton but a case history littered with reductionistic terminology. Waldron's "pause" pays off for him as there is a line in this ten-stanza poem (written in a Beat poetic, Dylanesque style): "No one remembered but the business men / Who entered brandishing a bill" (119). Waldron's interpretation of the poem takes irresponsible wing:

Could the reference to a "bill" concern the financial settlement Tom Bennett brokered when Tom fathered a child out of wedlock? Thus, Bennett could also be considered one of the businessmen of the poem or perhaps one of the "cops" who "went off with his sister and daughter." Could this line be Merton's oblique reference (by reversing roles and gender) to the mother ("sister") and child ("daughter") he was "relieved of"? Could he have been urged by Tom Bennett to face his problem like a man "with a stiff upper lip"? Such an abandonment of mother and child and a financial settlement, by the way, would leave him alone, without "money and no social standing." . . . The last stanza of the poem says, "Puritans had them arrested." (125)

We (i.e., Waldron) do not think it far-fetched to consider this reference to the censors who often tried to "arrest" his writing, that is, "stop it" (125).

At times Waldron truly baffles as when he continues (five pages on in his analysis of this same poem) in a manner totally foreign to the poem: "It should be noted that by allowing Merton to write, Abbot Dunne violated the strictest sense of the Rule of St. Benedict. His motive may have been a monetary one, for the abbey was on the brink of financial ruin, and Merton's writing was a possible financial solution to the problem, as it indeed proved to be: Merton's royalties were substantial. So Abbot Fox continued to allow Merton to write

– except for the ban in the early 1950s when the orders of Dom Sortais forbade Merton to keep his journal” (122).

We return to Waldron’s treatment of a two-page dream (09/07/1962) which, again, illuminates Waldron’s unquestioned, and biased perspective. It is a moving dream which commences “near Bardstown” and Merton and a friend “meet two lovely young women dressed in white” (76). The dream then relocates to Gethsemani with powerfully distilled imagery. There is the following poetic image as they are “on the road” (back to Gethsemani): “On the road. High columns of silver grey smoke go up from the direction of Bardstown. ‘Tactical atomic weapons.’ Beautiful though. Some kind of test. It is here I think A. told me not to kiss her” (78). Waldron’s commentary includes: “Is this what can happen to some men who go without contact with the feminine? Do they use atomic weapons? Do they become soldiers?” (80). The mind blinks as one seeks to somehow connect this sociopolitical editorializing to Merton’s dream. For there is no connection save in Waldron’s mind. Nor does this method keep faith with Waldron’s prefatory “announcement” that he is “offering readers [his] interpretation of Merton’s life and work, employing Jungian theory as [his] guidepost and paradigm” (vii).

In his fine work, *C. G. Jung and Paul Tillich: The Psyche as Sacrament* [1984], John P. Dourley writes: “For Jung the process of individuation is intrinsically religious in that the assimilation by the ego of its unconscious resources and energies is an ‘incarnation.’” Quoting Jung he writes that “self-realization – to put it in religious or metaphysical terms – amounts to the God’s incarnation. . . . As a result of the integration of conscious and unconscious, [man’s] ego enters the ‘divine’ realm where it participates in ‘God’s suffering.’ The cause of the suffering is in both cases the same, namely ‘incarnation,’ which on the human level appears as ‘individuation’” (54). Thus it is that Hillman states: “We owe our symptoms an immense debt. The soul can exist without its therapists but not without its afflictions” (*Revisioning Psychology* 71). In one of his later “Dark” or “Terrible Sonnets” Gerard Manley Hopkins writes: “I am gall, I am heartburn. God’s most deep decree / Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me.”

Roger Lipsey’s fine work, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*, repays repeated readings. For where Waldron ignores the story of Merton, Lipsey’s story-with-pictures and narratives is restorative. Among its many riches are stories of Merton’s dearest friends and fellow artists. For Merton-the-man had a unique capacity for friendship with the most varied of persons. Best guess is that he wrote approximately 10,000 letters to roughly 1,000 persons! His gastrointestinal and dermatological distress and monastic responsibilities notwithstanding, his creative output was stunning. Lipsey’s verbal portraits of Merton’s “friends” are lively and catch Merton’s capacity for intimacy. Nowhere does Waldron wonder how his profoundly “ill” Merton, “the patient,” riven by psychopathology, could possibly have the energy to create so impressively and connect so deeply. Lipsey

notes Merton's affinity for Buddhism and Taoism, surely a central and enriching feature of his later years. Nowhere is this noteworthy and soul-enriching affinity noted by Waldron. One can readily perceive Merton's authentic spirit in the sestet of Hopkins' sonnet "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.