

## This Spiritual Light – This Vision

Review of

*Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*

Edited by Paul M. Pearson

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xxv + 239 pp. / \$39.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Bonnie Thurston**

As does German scholarship, I begin by explaining what this book is not. It is not the first collection of Merton's photographs (although it is the most expansive), and it is most assuredly not a "coffee-table book" (although it is beautifully produced). Edward Rice's 1970 biography, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, is replete with photographs of Merton. Published the same year, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* includes photos by Merton and by its author, John Howard Griffin. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* includes pictures taken by Merton on that journey; similarly, the journal of May 1968 published as *Woods, Shore, Desert* documents in word and photographs Merton's journey to the American West. Esther de Waal's 1992 directed retreat book, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, includes many of Merton's photographs. In May 2013 the Center for Interfaith Relations in Louisville, Kentucky sponsored an exhibit of photographs by Ralph Eugene Meatyard along with photographs and calligraphies by Merton, with a catalogue published by Fons Vitae Press that included several helpful essays. Exhibits at the McGrath Art Gallery at Bellarmine University of Merton's photography (2003) and Merton's Zen photography (2005) each generated catalogues with essays and photographs.

In the present volume Paul M. Pearson, director of the Bellarmine Merton Center and chief of research for the Merton Legacy Trust, a consummate Merton scholar and a friend to many readers of this journal, has edited an extensive collection of Merton's photographs and provided helpful contextual essays. This is not a coffee-table book to flip idly through, but a book for lingering in, one which could only have been done by a scholar who knows the Merton corpus intimately.

Educational theory suggests that people learn in different ways. Seeing the world through his camera's lens is seeing the world through Merton's eyes, and thus knowing him in a different way than one does from reading his journals, essays or poetry. Access to more of his photos provides another entrée to the complex person who was Thomas Merton, for which his readers owe Pearson a debt of gratitude.

The volume's introductory essay (vi–xxv) places Merton in the context of his artistic parents, traces his knowledge of other photographers and introduces his own beginnings in the art, first

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with the help of John Howard Griffin, and then, most importantly and extensively, through Ralph Eugene Meatyard. Those of a certain age will be amused to discover that Merton's first camera was a Kodak Instamatic (see xix). Various friends lent Merton a variety of cameras of varying quality and sophistication. His favorite seems to have been a Canon F-X (see xx). His photographic medium was black and white. His "knowledge of the technical aspects of photography was . . . limited" (xxiii), but as the book's contents demonstrate, his eye for subjects was clear, quirky and fascinating, often revealing "this spiritual light – this vision" (xviii) of unexpected beauty in ordinary objects. As Pearson correctly observes, Merton "used his camera as a contemplative instrument" (xxv).

Each of the book's five chapters (the fifth is a collection of photographs of Merton) opens with a brief essay to orient the reader/viewer to the photographs that follow. Thereafter the layout of the book follows the pattern of a quotation from Merton on the left-hand page and a full-page photo on the right. This gives the work a sense of spaciousness and allows the reader/viewer to enter its contemplative nature. Pearson's sensitive pairing of Merton's words with his images enhances the reader/viewer's experience. (Sources are provided at the back of the book.)

Chapter One, "The Paradox of Place" (1-49), presents photographs of and around Gethsemani and at the Kentucky Shaker village of Pleasant Hill (these are my favorite). The photographs in Chapter Two, "A Hidden Wholeness: Zen Photography" (50-129), although of recognizable objects, are more abstract. I would have appreciated a fuller explanation of the principles by which Pearson chose these photos as exemplars of Zen (but see 52-53). Similarly, in Chapter Three, "Shining Like the Sun: Friends and Faces Radiating the Spark in the Soul" (130-63), it might have helped those not familiar with Merton's biography to have had some information about who the people identified by name were and what their relationship to him was; the photographs themselves indicate Merton's gift for portraiture. Chapter Four, "Woods, Shore, Desert, East: The Pilgrim" (164-215), are photographs from Merton's 1968 journeys to the American west, Alaska and Asia, some of which appeared in *Woods, Shore, Desert* and in *The Asian Journal*. As Pearson notes, they do, indeed, suggest the "integration of [Merton's] inner and outer journeys" (166), what Merton described as "Solitude outside geography or in it" (214).

The final chapter, "The Joyful Face behind the Camera: Images of Merton" (216-33), concludes "by turning the camera on Merton" (217). Most of the photographs are from the final decade of his life. The images on pages 223 and 231 (which I had never before seen) depicted an older, wiser monk. His picture on page 231 is worth the price of the book. It altered some of my long-held opinions about Merton. This is what can happen when one's way of knowing shifts from word to image, and it is the great contribution of Pearson's book.

There is an old saying that to know someone one must walk a mile in their moccasins. To change the metaphor slightly, we know someone by seeing the world through their eyes. Pearson's judiciously edited, helpfully contextualized and beautifully produced book gives us a glimpse of the world through Merton's eyes. Further, the book illuminates Merton's writing, especially about contemplation and the travels of the final year of his life, and is thus an important addition to Merton studies. On January 18, 1950 Merton recorded in his journal that "my work is my hermitage because it is *writing* that helps me most of all to be a solitary and a contemplative here at Gethsemani" (*Entering the Silence 400*). *Beholding Paradise* suggests that, more than a decade later, his photography did so as well.