

poetry, the latter sometimes haiku, sometimes other structured verse, and sometimes free association ("improvisational image rhythms of my head and heart at this moment produce a kind of spontaneous verbal play at poetry" [50]). While the transitions add vitality to the book, their suddenness at times jars and distracts. Second is the verse itself. Some of it sparkles, particularly many of the haiku and passages, such as Seitz's poem on seeing his wife for the first time (163). But other efforts do not work as well. Some of the verse is too private and compressed. It jangles the ear, disrupts the flow ("the 'see-through' light a breath of aura-breath to me. The birds . . . shifting shape in a sway-lift . . ." [31]), and again borders on drawing too much attention to itself.

The reader might find interest in a parallel reading of George Kilcourse's recent work, *Ace of Freedoms*. Both books take explicit aim at Merton the poet, yet each sights him through a different scope. Kilcourse's is a more systematic and developed treatment of Merton's poetic theory and fills in places that Seitz's more memoir-like treatment (necessarily) passes over. But Seitz puts the more fleshy texture of face-to-face initiation by the master onto Kilcourse's analysis. The authors comment on many of the same themes (e.g., looking versus seeing, developing "the paradise ear," primal movement, art as residue of the journey, etc.) in complementary ways.

These cautions made, Seitz is worth reading. His insider knowledge of his mentor is arresting stuff. His simple love for the man and wonder at his life-giving profundity shine through the occasional flaws in Seitz's literary lens. The book title is lifted from one of Merton's poems about the pure livingness of things. Flowers and all creatures sing golden songs "for nobody": they sing simply because they joyously are. Seitz's memory portrait catches much of the exuberant music that was sung by his beloved Tom.

Esther de Waal. *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*.
Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1993. 114 pages. \$13.00.

Reviewed by Dianne Aprile.

A spiritual retreat, carried out alone in silence, is by definition a private and personal journey. Anyone anywhere who has tried to

meditate daily—be it in the quiet of a predawn kitchen or within the four walls of a monastery room—knows that the path to prayer and spiritual growth is by necessity a tailor-made trial. While you and I both may find Merton's writing a good companion for the trip, it is a fact that we will be stopped in our tracks by different passages along the way, just as we sometimes will be led to very different places by the same passage.

That is the beauty of it, of course. You cannot predict prayer or organize it or even honestly plan it. You can only await it with an open heart. I'm reminded of the lines in a poem called "Traveling at Home," by Kentucky writer Wendell Berry, that address the challenge and rewards—and, yes, surprises—of walking a familiar path: "Even in a country you know by heart / it's hard to go the same way twice. / The life of the going changes. / The chances change and make a new way." A personal retreat is not so different. Surrender, acceptance, and spontaneity are what is needed, not a road map.

With this in mind, the challenge taken up by Esther de Waal in her new book, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, is clearly an ambitious one. Her mission is to offer readers a stimulating mix of Merton writing and photography, day by day, for one week. A different theme is addressed daily in chapters with titles such as "The Call," "Response," and "The Demands of Love."

"This book is meant to become a prayer," de Waal writes in her opening chapter, subtitled "Some Practical Notes." "It is not a book about Thomas Merton," she continues. "It simply shows the succession of steps taken by one woman in trying to draw closer to God with Merton's help. I do not follow any accepted scheme or pattern, but have devised something which seemed to make sense for my own needs at the time."

This Merton-infused field guide to prayer is intended to inspire meditation and not prescribe it, she states. Passages from his essays, poems, and journals are offered as nudges in the right direction, as are the black-and-white photographs scattered through the text. When the author sticks to this stated mission, the book resonates with Merton's spirit, buoyant and generous. Yet there is often a less comfortable feeling of being led by the hand as you read the book. It is true, as she notes, that it is hard for many people today to carve out a slot in their busy lives for prayer and solitude. But is the answer to save them the time and trouble of figuring out how to do it—and to supply them, instead, with step-by-step directions?

In her opening salvo, de Waal demonstrates a sense of adventure and willingness to break out of routine that her spiritual mentor would surely approve. She suggests keeping a journal or sketch book, lighting candles, taking slow meditation-walks outdoors, and collecting stones or shards of bark to bring back to one's usual place of prayer for comfort and encouragement. This openness to improvisation and to sharing a bit of herself with the reader gives an air of intimacy to the book that is inviting from the start. De Waal candidly describes the structure of the book as "entirely of my own devising. It has not been dictated by anything other than what I perceived as my own need to be refreshed and to gain some new perspective in my life."

Private inspiration is a good place to start writing such a book, but de Waal's highly individualized response to Merton's work and her random way of presenting it to the reader is part of what makes the reader, in the end, feel curiously left out of the experience. It is not that de Waal's personal feelings get in the way or that her conclusions about Merton's work are eccentric. It is the format, the catch-as-catch-can framework she personally found so helpful, that diverts attention from her stated mission.

It is as if de Waal could not decide which book to write: a memoir of her own experiences with Merton and prayer; a how-to book on self-styled retreats; a beginner's guide for Merton readers; or a meditation manual. Any one would work. Trying to combine them all is a far trickier business. One can almost hear Father Louis, red pen busy on the page, whispering: "Simplify. Simplify. Simplify."

The 114-page book, cram-packed with Merton material as well as her own, often tries too hard to flesh out the spirit of Merton's words and images. A little more faith in the power they wield on their own might have allowed her to relax and let Merton speak for himself.

The photographic portion of the book, for example, consists of a series of twenty-eight pictures—twenty-one shot by Merton, five by de Waal, and two (the front cover and frontespiece portraits) by his good friend and master photographer John Howard Griffin. After reading the introduction, which only noted the Merton photos, I wrongly assumed all the pictures were by him and found myself stumbling over the views of the French city of St. Antonin, where Merton lived for a time, and another of a cloister in the Pyrenees, near where he was born. These more conventional Old World landscapes somehow seemed out of place beside Merton's characteristic Zen-like images of

stark wooden chairs shot in high contrast against a porch wall or a mandala posing as a common wicker basket or a primitive cross against an empty background—a brand burned into a cloudless sky. Were the unfamiliar, untitled, uncredited European photos among the “hitherto unreproduced photos” mentioned in the introduction? Even if they were, I wondered, why would the author include them in a contemplative book that emphasizes letting go of the busy, the overstated, the obvious, the complicated?

By the end of the book, after I’d read the photo credits that appear on the last page, I realized these were not Merton’s photos, but de Waal’s work. It was there I also discovered one of the book’s many typographical discrepancies that confuse the reader—mistakes an editor should have caught. This one was a misidentification of a picture of what looks like a Zen garden. Intrigued by the shot, I had repeatedly flipped back and forth, twenty-eight pages, between the photo and its bewildering mistitle, “Stone wall in close up.”

There are other such confusing lapses in editing, something that is an annoyance in any book but is a contradiction in a volume intended to quiet down the reader. Redundancies and cumbersome sentences show up throughout the book to frustrate even the most careful reader. For example: “And now his father was also now dying. . . .” Or de Waal’s definition of holistic: “using my sight and imagination and senses.” Or this head-spinning sentence: “There is a helpful image about how in solitude I am able to draw closer to those I love which comes in something written about Merton by one of his former novices.” A good editor might have salvaged that line, made its meaning come alive.

The trouble with this book is not the mix of Merton’s words and pictures but the hodge-podge of other material, a general lack of focus, the worrisome lapses in editing, and a footnote system that is far from reader-friendly. Because there are no numbers or letters attached to quoted passages and only some loosely organized notes for each chapter at the back of the book, it is impossible at times to know whose words you are reading without rustling pages back and forth. De Waal often breaks out passages by Merton and presents them as separate blocks within the text—but not always. Sometimes authors’ words about Merton are also presented that way—but not always.

Nonetheless, de Waal’s choices are excellent and worth recalling: pages from Merton’s journals on the spiritual power of daily rit-

uals; his reminder that we must always, each day, start fresh from where we are; passages from the Psalms that penetrate our everyday routines. Framed by Merton’s photos of the basic tools of domestic life—ladles and ladders, a woodcutter’s trestle, a wagon wheel—the Psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures take on an irresistible lyrical resilience.

As a personal narrator, Esther de Waal is enthusiastic, knowledgeable, invigorating and confident in her reading of Merton. But she is also intrusive. In the end, I wish in her writing she had heeded an insight she offers readers early in the book: “There is such a danger that I talk about God, and enjoy talking about God, and do not stop and in the silence of my heart listen to Him speaking.”

Perhaps if she had allowed Merton’s words to speak more directly to her audience and had surrendered her own desire to talk about him, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton* might have proved a more rewarding prayer companion. As Henri Nouwen says of Merton in the foreword, “. . . this ordinary man was a true guide to the heart of God and the heart of this world.”

E. Glenn Hinson, editor. *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox, 1993. 200 pages. \$14.99 paperback.

Reviewed by Elaine Prevallet, S.L.

E. Glenn Hinson’s *Spirituality in Ecumenical Perspective* is a collection of essays presented “In honor of Douglas and Dorothy Steere, beloved friends.” The contributors are members of the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, a group begun shortly after the Second Vatican Council by two men, Benedictine liturgist Godfrey Diekmann and Douglas Steere, Quaker observer at the council. Steere believed in the value of a “functional ecumenism that begins with all of us encouraging each other to practice our own religious tradition to the hilt and to share our experiences with each other in every creative way we can devise” (9). To this end, he initiated annual gatherings such as this group in the United States and a Zen-Christian group in Japan, so that persons from various traditions could reflect together on issues of