

dated, on history, science, psychology, advertising, and world politics. His comments on Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim religious traditions reveal his considerable knowledge and respect for these religions and hint at the value of interfaith dialogues and exchanges.

In summary, these lectures make a valuable contribution to the work by or about Thomas Merton, which continues to speak to the challenges of being a Christian today.

Ron Seitz. *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton*. Liguori, Missouri: Triumph Books, 1993. 188 pages. \$19.95 hardcover.

Reviewed by Thomas F. McKenna, C.M.

In a work of prose and poetry, Ron Seitz sketches the wavy yet firm lines of his ten-year friendship with Thomas Merton. His book is as much autobiography as biography as it probes the rich, transforming, and even numinous experience of two gifted people mixing souls. It is a story of apprenticeship—lessons in the poet's craft, directions for following the gospel, wisdoms for living life deeply. Seitz is the journeyman and Merton the master as the disciple recounts the deepening of their bond over the monk's final years.

Seitz frames his account around two days. The first is a week after Merton's death. The author sits alone through a dark and bitter cold night and struggles to come to terms with his mentor's passing. The second is another winter's day twenty years later, during which he wanders across Gethsemani's grounds kicking over memory stones to discover what of Merton lies underneath. Seitz writes, of course, from memory. But it is one that he has fed and cultivated. There are letters and cards Merton wrote him, notes and journals he kept before and after the death, conversations with mutual friends, two decades of reminiscing and mulling—all passed through the many-hued palette of Seitz's imagination. It is this last that Seitz claims gives his recollection special power and truth. In his own words, this is a "memory vision" of Merton, a remembrance "of what it was to have touched Tom in our passing-thru" (28).

The first day chronicles the rawness of loss and, to a lesser degree, the balm of remembrance. With Merton's other close friends,

Seitz is numbed by the suddenness. But other feelings seep in alongside the unbelief. Flashes of early hero worship come back. Vignettes of first meetings with Merton's close friends play out. Most vivid of all is the felt memory of Merton's innocence, his "awe and wonder at the 'first-time Gift of everything in Creation'" (25). For Seitz, Merton is quintessentially young, a marvelous open-faced laugh-er who was present to everything. It is Merton's entire motion that captivates Seitz, the "fluid, free movement" (31) of the monk's whole bearing. This is the *persona* the poet-friend would portray, though he knows from the start it is impossible to do. But so much of Merton's legacy is precisely the go-ahead to try such a thing. Memories of his encouragement to "reveal the inexpressible . . . in the concrete," "give Body images . . . as 'evidence' of Spirit," "leave residue-evidence of that journey to another country" (34) crowd Seitz's imagination.

The second day, calmer and more elaborated, is a memory tour of Merton's Kentucky homeland. As he moves across the monastery hills, the author hears his departed mentor tell him to become empty and open, a "voicebox of truth" (49), one of God's recording angels (64). Through memory, Merton continues to instruct in the mystery and arts of language. A pond trips off scenes of a picnic shared there in the spring of '68 when the older man spoke of writing and the struggle for the true self. Climbing a rise brings back the invigoration of Merton's simple presence.

Seitz spends the bulk of the day at the monk's hermitage. He stokes up the old fireplace, sits down in Merton's chair, even snoozes in the master's bed. Throughout, old declamations, one-liners, confrontations, sweet agreements, shared music, and mutual critique flood the visitor's awareness. He steps outside to sit on a stone wall made sacred by mutual revelations made on it twenty years before. For Seitz, it was wrestling with the monastic call. For Merton, it was a parallel grappling with "the nurse issue" (123).

The visitor continues into the woods, musing with his friend all along. He stops at a log the two of them used as a bench and hears echoes of instructions on the poet's art. The day wanes and Seitz returns to the porch to relive his last hours with Merton. The leaving for Bangkok—a stop at the author's home for a family meal and farewells, a quick trip to the newly founded Merton Center at Bellarmine, the dawn ride to Louisville and the plane waiting to take its rider Pacificward. Again, memories of place tease out memories of words and

silences. Leaving Gethsemani, Seitz pauses at Merton's grave to remind himself why he came here this day—"to remember, to remind others who might have forgotten . . ." (179).

On the score of personal tribute to Merton, Seitz's book succeeds. It is personal because the younger man speaks from the privileged spot of intimacy. He conjures up Merton's magnetism, zest for living, ready humor, and disarming transparency. He catches—and mimics—cadences of his teacher's speech. He translates favorite Mertonian wisdoms and themes into the warm and occasionally private coin of friend's talk. Even when it is Seitz who speaks, Merton is present in the words as backlighting and undertone. It is tribute because Thomas Merton is woven so tightly into Seitz's soul. He is one with Seitz's inner voice, prompting him to write, helping him to pray, encouraging him to be vulnerable. The book is believable testimony to the power and subtle pervasiveness of communion.

On other scores, *Song for Nobody* achieves mixed results. To be fair to Seitz, the genre, biography through autobiography, is a tricky one. Seitz acknowledges this dual intent when at the beginning of the book he proposes to paint a memory portrait of Merton and at the end avers he has been "looking for the spiritual seed that Tom Merton planted in my person" (183). There is no question that authors must use their own experience as the prism through which to present their subjects. The challenge is to remain on the proper side of that porous line between revealing the other through the self and obscuring the subject because too many of the writer's issues enter in.

In many parts of his narrative, Seitz stands where he should and allows his man to come forward. This is clearly so, for instance, in the recounting of their nights out (115ff.) and their rides to town (76ff.). But there are sections where it is not easy to determine who the central actor is. At times in their extended conversations, I wondered if the book were not more a vehicle for Seitz's wisdom and writing than it was for Merton's. There are occasions, in other words, when the author gets in the way and crowds out his master. The fine line here is the one preachers hopefully try to keep before their eyes—how to reveal the Word through one's person, but not cover it over by being too densely personal. This is no easy divide to negotiate. At times Seitz wanders across it.

Another reservation concerns literary quality. For one thing, the narrative often moves quite rapidly between Seitz's use of prose and

poetry, the latter sometimes hiaku, 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