

dominated by traffic, errands that seemed to go awry and frustrations with technology – a day that did not seem to easily lend itself to prayer. Yet, my mind was brought back to Merton’s image again and again, and the sense of my own “fractured and disconnected prayers,” where somehow “the God who is in all moves.” Could I dare trust I might find God in the midst of the day’s frustrations?

The encouragement to “know how to meditate” in a variety of circumstances became a recurring thought. It is certainly something I need to work on, especially when my response to an unsolvable technological glitch was the desire to toss my phone through the nearest window. In the midst of this frustration, while navigating Toronto’s perpetual traffic jam, “How I pray is breathe” emerged as a mantra. I had read the sentence many times in *Day of a Stranger*, but never in isolation from “What I wear is pants. What I do is live.”⁷ The genius of isolating the sentence and placing it beside the image of “the nerve endings of our fractured and disconnected prayers” allowed it to enter my consciousness in a new way, calling me again and again to remain in prayer, even if it was only the awareness that my breathing needed to be more intentional. Since then, the image and sentence have conspired to punctuate my consciousness on multiple occasions.

The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Image can take its place alongside *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours* as a resource for deepening prayer. John Moses has skillfully integrated image and word in this anthology, inviting these two forms of Merton’s artistic expression into focused dialogue with each other. He has, in doing so, helped us see both anew, while creating a framework that beckons us into a deeper experience of prayer. This anthology surprised me. It is not the art study I had anticipated, but it has quickly become a valuable resource for meditation and prayer.

Paul Pynkoski

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose: The Philosophy of the Great Latin Fathers* (5 talks: 3 CDs); *Thomas Merton’s Great Sermons and Reflections* (4 talks with Afterword by Michael W. Higgins: 2 CDs); *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T. S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir* (6 talks: 3 CDs); *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner* (6 talks with Afterword by Michael W. Higgins: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018).

Four sets of audio recordings by Thomas Merton were released by Now

7. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 41.

You Know Media in 2018, only one of which consists completely of material not previously available. *Thomas Merton on Augustine, Jerome, and Ambrose* is comprised of three conferences on Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, one on Ambrose's treatises on virginity, and one on Jerome's letter to his young disciple Eustochium (daughter of Paula, one of Jerome's closest friends and followers). All are from late summer of 1962, a few months after Merton's conferences to his novices began to be taped. This set is not accompanied by any introductory or concluding commentary, so the context of the talks has to be deduced from the presentations themselves, and the printed information provided on the case is somewhat misleading: it is clear from the recordings that all three conferences on Augustine precede that on Ambrose (at the outset of the latter, Merton corrects some misinformation on recent Russian space shots that he had given before beginning his second presentation on Augustine, which was followed by the third on the very next day), but the Augustine talks are the first, fourth and fifth of the set; the Jerome conference is entitled "An Introduction to St. Jerome: Caritas vs. Cupiditas," when in fact there is no mention in this talk of the distinction between charity and cupidity, a characteristic Augustinian theme discussed by Merton in the conferences on that Father. This editorial sloppiness, also found in other sets from this year, is evident as well in a glitch on the recording itself, as the brief audio identification of the topic of the first conference is erroneously repeated at the outset of three of the other conferences, actually drowning out Merton's own opening words – someone obviously pushed the wrong button, and no one, also obviously, noticed it.

The conferences on Augustine and Ambrose were part of a longer series on the Church Fathers, more specifically on the patristic attitude toward studies, that had already considered the earlier writers Cyprian, Tertullian and Lactantius, and would go on to look at the later authors Boethius and Cassiodorus; these were given on Sundays, open to the entire community, and generally lasting about an hour, twice as long as the conferences during the week. After briefly summarizing the perspectives of Augustine's predecessors and surveying some of his principal writings, Merton's opening conference on Augustine turns to the *De Doctrina Christiana* (translated *On Christian Teaching* – centered on the scriptures – rather than "doctrine" in the technical sense), that will be the focus of all three of these talks. He points out that the first three books consider scriptural interpretation, while the fourth and final book, actually written years earlier and much less original, looks at preaching, communicating the word. He then explains the key distinctions found in Book 1 – between sign and reality (*signum* and *res*) and use and frui-

tion (*uti* and *frui*), and the confusion that ensues when a sign is taken for the reality it signifies, when what should be a means is taken as an end, what is relative is substituted for an absolute – by definition, becomes an idol. Such insight, Merton says, “is fabulous,” ultimately a warning not to mistake the letter for the spirit, knowledge (*scientia*) for genuine love and wisdom (*sapientia*): *scientia inflat* (puffs up) but *caritas aedificat* (builds up). The following week’s conference is mainly taken up with the second and third books, concerned with signs and with their ambiguity, respectively, particularly with the meaning of words and literary figures, the dangers of an unreflective literalism, which leads to a servitude to the sign, and the pastoral explanation of the difficulties in interpreting the scriptures, which is both a check on intellectual pride and a recognition of the satisfaction that results from challenging work – the joy of discovery as an essential element of study. The final conference (evidently given on August 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration, rather than on a Sunday, and hence of “weekday” length), looks at Augustine’s attitude toward “profane” letters (secular studies), his principle that truth, wherever it may be found, comes from and belongs to God, but also the inherent danger if such material is approached with a possessive spirit (*cupiditas*) rather than selfless love (*caritas*). All meaning in scripture, according to Augustine, conduces either to the performance of good works or to communicating the truths of faith; while Merton notes that this principle can be applied too naïvely, so that whatever does not seem to do one or the other on the literal level is shifted to a figurative or allegorical meaning, which can result in subjective interpretations with only the most tenuous connections to the actual text, his overall reading of the *De Doctrina* is admiring and deeply appreciative. He finds in it a corrective to any approach to scripture, or to studies in general, that rests content with the level of signs, of concepts detached from life, or that substitutes sign for reality, for the ultimate Reality of God as end, that tries to rest in the enjoyment of that which cannot provide what the human spirit ultimately seeks, the goal for which the human person has been made.

The conference entitled “St. Ambrose’s Treatises: The Mystery of Silence and Virginité” directly follows those on Augustine and is closely related, as Merton indicates in passing, to the article he was currently writing that would appear as “Virginité and Humanism in the Western Fathers.”¹ After providing an overview of different kinds of humanism, emphasizing Christian humanism as rooted in the doctrines of the human person as made in the divine image and of the incarnation of the Word as

1. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 113-27, originally published in *Sponsa Regis* 34 (January 1963) 131-44.

a revelation of true personhood, Merton briefly summarizes Ambrose's life and work before turning to his writings on virginity, which he finds intrinsically connected to the mystery of silence, a receptivity that coexists in fruitful tension with the more active dimension, as represented by almsgiving, the complementarity of solitude and community. The virgin is called to give material things outside herself and to treasure spiritual things within herself, the "secret" of her espousal to Christ. He emphasizes Ambrose's positive attitude toward women, his robust defense even of Eve, deceived by a supernatural being (unlike Adam), his Marian devotion, his rejection of the pagan perception of women as property, his exaltation of virginity as a liberation of women from the servitude of pagan domestic life, his consideration of bodily beauty as a symbol of interior beauty. For the virgin, according to Ambrose, scripture itself takes the place of conjugal love; it is a source of fruitfulness, the bridal chamber in which the spouse encounters Christ the Word. Merton recognizes and commends Ambrose's warm-hearted affection for virgins (including his own sister) as representing one dimension of the humanism of Christian love that far surpasses pagan humanism with its very androcentric preconceptions and its emphasis on stoic duty rather than generous self-gift.

The Jerome conference, dated August 24, 1962 on the master list of conferences (though not specified here), is actually part of a different series, on early monastic fathers, being given on weekdays during the same general period. (Three more presentations on Jerome were made later in the year; why only this one is included in the set is unclear, though it does fit well with the theme of studies in the Augustine and Ambrose conferences, and it includes material also used in the "Virginity and Humanism" article.) Merton recommends Jerome's *Letters*, along with Augustine's *Confessions*, as the two patristic books with which everyone should be familiar. In particular, he considers this letter to Eustochium on fighting temptations (more applicable to himself than to his recipient, Merton believes) to be "good solid stuff." Above all it is the use of scripture to deal with temptation that Jerome emphasizes. Through the word one is able to take refuge in God, as monks affirm daily in the prayers of compline, when the community entrusts itself to the divine protection as it moves into the night when the conscious mind is less in control. Since there is an intrinsic human need to love, one should direct that need to its highest end, combat fleshly desire with spiritual desire, with desire for God. Interior discipline, encompassing both clarity of understanding and the ordering of the will, cannot prevent unwanted thoughts but can work to keep them under control, can "dash them against the rock who is Christ," encountered in the word of God. Ultimately, Jerome recognizes that the

determination and generosity that are required to overcome temptation are not simply a matter of human effort but are a divine gift to be sought in prayer, a lesson, Merton reminds his audience, that is particularly valuable for monks.

Aside from its revised title and the substitution of an Afterword by Michael Higgins for the original Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, *Thomas Merton's Great Sermons and Reflections* appears from its list of contents to be a reissue of *Thomas Merton's Great Sermons* from 2012.² But in fact there is one significant change: even though the last of the four items in the set is identified, both on the case and on the CD itself, as a "Sermon on Easter,"³ this selection – the only item in the original group that really had any claim to be called "great" – has inexplicably disappeared from the revised set, so its listing here is erroneous; in the (unlikely) circumstance that something from the initial set had to be eliminated, the logical choice would have been the so-called "Sermon on Prose and Poetry on the Passion of Christ," which as Higgins points out in his helpful comments is not a sermon at all but part of Merton's series of conferences on poetry, and was in fact subsequently included as such in the 2013 set *Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry*.⁴ What has been substituted for the Easter homily, as indicated by the revised title ". . . and Reflections" but only explicitly identified on the product itself by Higgins in his Afterword (the description on the company website is accurate), are a pair of "private" recordings, made by Merton himself at his hermitage, that frame the third selection, the brief sermon for May 21, 1967, Trinity Sunday. The first part, made the preceding day, consists of what Merton calls points that "probably won't make it" into the actual preached sermon, and could even be considered a sort of "anti-sermon" (on the implicit analogy with the "anti-poems" he was writing at the time). Here he critiques the tendency to treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a sort of abstract conceptual "fact" that is then used to defend a position that "things are better than we suppose" – that one should simply accept whatever happens as ultimately God's will, that somehow evil will be magically transformed into good and everything will "work out" in the end. Instead, Merton affirms, the Trinity gospel, with its directive to go, teach, baptize in the name of Father, Son and Spirit, is a summons to responsible action to transform the broken world through

2. See my review of this set in *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013) 224-25.

3. This sermon, never delivered, was recorded by Merton in his hermitage on September 14, 1967; it was later published as Thomas Merton, *He Is Risen* (Niles, IL: Argus, 1975).

4. See my review of this set in *The Merton Annual* 27 (2014) 221-22.

the power of the resurrected Christ, which is to be manifested by selfless love. The second reflection, made sometime on Trinity Sunday itself, begins by picking up on the idea of a theology of mission, a theology of the kingdom, goes on to note briefly that communion is higher than communication,⁵ then turns very personal and self-reflective. Drawing on his recent reading of the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski (soon to be exiled due to his critique of Marxist orthodoxy), as well as Jean-Paul Sartre and Gerald Sykes' 1967 book *The Cool Millennium*, Merton analyzes his own conflicted attitude toward his writing, his desire to have the rightness of his ideas be accepted by his readers and his counteractive tendency to be combative and confrontational. He concludes that only solitude, acceptance of his own nothingness, is a genuine alternative to worrying about readers' reactions. This extraordinary self-examination, perhaps more raw and revelatory than anything comparable in the written journals, has hitherto been virtually unknown; while it is only tangentially related to the sermon it accompanies, it may indeed be considered a "great reflection" and its appearance here (though completely concealed by the inaccurate contents list, and given only brief attention by Higgins) provides a potentially significant resource for future commentators and an insightful experience for present listeners.

The other two sets have a literary focus. *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T. S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir* begins with the announcement: "To enhance your appreciation of the talks in this set, we've included a discussion of the content and context presented by a leading Merton expert. You can hear this presentation at the end of the series." However there is no such presentation provided for this set, and no indication that what looks like a series of previously unreleased recordings consists largely of material already available. Only the two opening presentations on Edmund Muir, given on October 2 and 16, 1966 (undated in the contents list) as part of the weekly conferences (reduced in length to a half-hour) that Merton continued to give on Sundays after moving full-time to the hermitage, are newly issued. Though Merton had given three conferences on the work of T. S. Eliot as part of his 1965 series on poetry that were not included in the *Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand*

5. This distinction is first made by Merton in his essay "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979] 54-79, first published in *The Mountain Path* 3 [October 1966] 339-48 and later in *Monastic Exchange* 2 [Summer 1970] 1-10); it is most familiar from the final words of his talk at the Temple of Understanding Conference in Calcutta in October 1968, less than two months before his death (Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin [New York: New Directions, 1973] 308).

set, what is found here are not these missing talks but the four Sunday conferences that immediately followed those on Muir and focus on the meaning of classicism in literature, focusing particularly on John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and including discussion of Eliot's Milton criticism; these had been previously included as the first four tracks of *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classic Literature* from 2013.⁶ The talks on Muir are closely related to Merton's article "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir,"⁷ published in the spring of 1967 and clearly drawing on much of the same material, often using the same language, as the conferences. Merton discusses Muir (1887-1959) as a little-known poet whose roots in a kind of mythical consciousness can be traced to his upbringing in the primitive setting of the Orkney Islands off the coast of Scotland, and whose work manifests an extraordinary awareness of simple being, though often expressed in rather conventional form and diction. Particularly in his poems on animals, as Merton notes in his second conference, Muir conveys a sense of the numinous quality of created beings, a sense of wonder at the presence of the divine immanent in the world, a sapiential view of life, of hidden wisdom, that poetry can and should provide and that can be of great benefit to monks in particular for *lectio*, liturgy and just living. This second presentation also includes a lengthy prelude on the recently deceased Fr. Stephen Pitra, an eccentric monk with a passion for flowers who died on the Feast of St. Francis (October 4) and is the subject of Merton's poem "Elegy for a Trappist"⁸ (not mentioned here). Merton reads a note from Fr. Stephen as a sort of "found poem," about gathering manure to fertilize his rose garden, whose different-colored blooms are arranged to represent the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. This unique and lovable personality, he suggests, illustrates the beauty of Trappist life in its acceptance of quirks and idiosyncrasies even though the official "line" is one of adherence to a common pattern of life. This affectionate remembrance is an added "bonus" on this recording.

The fourth and final 2018 release, *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner*, is simply comprised of Merton's six presentations on the southern novelist that were formerly part of the 2013 set, minus the four conferences (given just before those on Faulkner) that have now been shifted to the previous set. The same announcement about the commentary

6. See my review of this set in *The Merton Annual* 27 (2014) 223-25.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 29-36, first published in *The Sewanee Review* 75 (Spring 1967) 307-24.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 631-32.

by a Merton expert opens this set as it did the previous one, but this time it is accurate, being in fact the identical recording by Michael Higgins found on *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classic Literature*, moved from an Introduction to an Afterword and needing no alteration because it had originally discussed only those conferences explicitly on Faulkner, not the other four.

Presumably the various slip-ups found in the descriptions, both written and oral, in these sets were due to recent personnel changes at the company and will not be repeated as the newer staff gains more experience. While the complicated mingling of new and reissued material poses some difficulties for the prospective buyer, the additional conferences made available in these recordings make a valuable contribution to what Now You Know rightly refers to as Merton's "spoken-word legacy."

Patrick F. O'Connell

GORDON, Mary, *On Thomas Merton* (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 2018), pp. 147. ISBN: 978-1-61180-337-2 (cloth) \$22.95.

Professor of English at Barnard College and a successful novelist based in New York who identifies with both feminism and Roman Catholicism, Mary Gordon has written a highly readable little book entitled simply *On Thomas Merton*. This appropriately vague and impressionistic title signals to prospective readers that this is by no means another "definitive" book on the Trappist monk and writer, but a handful of highly subjective reflections by one writer on another.

The opening chapter shows Gordon's private struggle with Thomas Merton, whom she once rejected for *The Seven Storey Mountain*¹ ("a reason not to read any further in his oeuvre" [42]), but who nonetheless attracted her for representing "the best that progressive, politically engaged Catholicism might be" (2). When invited to give a lecture to celebrate the Merton centennial in 2015, she had to make up for over fifty years of willful neglect ("what I'd read of him had no resonance with me" [1]). Fortunately, she discovered Merton's journals – and "fell in love" (4). Readers of Gordon's *On Thomas Merton* will find the book full of such emotional reactions, gut responses and intimate quarrels with the monk and writer Gordon either praises or castigates for stylistic, rhetorical or ideological reasons. She is a passionate writer. For her there is no middle ground, a territory of neutral scholarship and balanced criticism; she is either hot or cold. She seems to need passion to drive her projects. But what is an asset for a novelist can become a liability for a critic. When read – and this is, arguably, one of

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).