

(the only surviving version, which must therefore serve as the copy text for this edition). He has cleaned up punctuation, paragraphing, abbreviations and typographical features that would have amounted to reams of errata slips. The text has become as reader-friendly as possible. He has also made a colossal, invaluable effort to cite all references to primary and secondary sources in the notes and even to provide translations of the untranslated Latin passages (avid readers of Merton know how often and how seamlessly he tends to interweave quotations in Latin and French). Finally, O'Connell provides several useful resources in the back matter: a bibliography of all cited sources (143-48), an appendix for further reading that lists updated materials nicely organized according to Merton's own four main topics (149-50), a complete scriptural index (151-59) and an enormously detailed general index (161-90).

All told, we owe a sizable debt to Patrick O'Connell for his meticulous work in making this ditto reproduction so beautifully accessible to us. After digesting it all, I cannot help but recall the words of Rowan Williams in his "A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton," first published back in 1978: "And so, in the long run, being interested in Thomas Merton is *not* being interested in an original, a 'shaping' mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities."⁴ As far as the contents of *A Monastic Introduction to Sacred Scripture* go, there is nothing terribly original in it. After all, Merton himself denies being a scripture scholar (see xliv). However, what overshadows the dates and details and dogmas is Merton's firm belief that to approach the Word of God is to approach the *possibility of true inner freedom* – and, as O'Connell puts it, "To accept this challenge is to be brought into a new relationship with oneself, with the human community, with history and with the transcendent" (l).

Peter Vale

MERTON, Thomas, *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* edited by Paul M. Pearson (New York: Paulist Press, 2020), pp. xxv + 239. ISBN 978-0-8091-0625-7 (cloth) \$39.95.

In the interest of full disclosure, I must admit that Thomas Merton has been my *anam cara* since 2008 when I attended a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The retreat became a turning point in my life as I set out to acquire books and talks by Merton. One especially memorable experience was when the retreat leader, Jonathan Montaldo, arranged for us to spend

4. Rowan Williams, "A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978) 4; reprint in Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 17-19.

the afternoon at Merton's hermitage with Brother Paul Quenon. Brother Paul was a novice under Merton and is described on the monastery website as the monastery's "resident poet and photographer."¹ I have noticed in my visits to other Cistercian monasteries that monks often walk about with cameras. Presumably for them it is an additional tool for contemplating God's grandeur in nature.

In addition to being a poet and a prophet, Merton was also an artist and photographer. Merton believed that "Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."² There is no doubt that Merton found another dimension of himself in photography. Merton was so enthralled with the Canon FX that he exclaimed, "This is a Zen camera."³ What Merton saw so clearly was the Zen in such images – the bare simplicity, the "everyday mind" of the Zen master that found the extraordinary in the ordinary we normally overlook.⁴

In terms of photography as art, it is helpful to put Merton into context because more people are rediscovering the spiritual aspects of photography. In the modern era, curators and art critics have been reluctant to consider that art has a spiritual dimension. Charlene Spretnak⁵ lays this misperception to rest by delineating how artists have maintained a spiritual dimension in their craft. This is important because Merton's photography has a decidedly spiritual dimension.

Spretnak also discusses the art of William Blake. Blake influenced Merton in his college years. Both men rebelled against the mechanistic-based, reason-driven society and church. Merton's master's thesis at Columbia was on Blake.⁶ For purposes of this review, it is sufficient to say that Blake and Merton inculcated a spiritual dimension in their art forms.

Bonnie Thurston has provided an excellent review of *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton*, edited by Merton Center Director and scholar Paul M. Pearson, in a recent issue of *The Merton*

1. See <https://monks.org/monks-pages/br-paul>.

2. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 34; subsequent references will be cited as "NMF" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Dagg (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 141.

4. See <https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/piercing-the-surface-thomas-mertons-zen-photography>.

5. Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art: Art Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6. Thomas Merton, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay on Interpretation," *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 387-453.

Seasonal;⁷ therefore, I want to approach this review somewhat differently. I am going to explain contemplative photography so that other photographers can improve their understanding of the type of photography that Merton discovered. Second, I will show that the photographs can serve as a source for what might be called *visio divina*.

After retiring as an educator, my passion became photography. As I pursued my passion, I was delighted to find out that Merton too was a photographer. His photography would fall under the category of Zen photography (see 51-53). In the Zen approach, the photographers use reason and their imagination to determine what they see and what they want to convey to others. Merton, like the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose work Merton also admired, was interested in photographing the “inscape,” the hidden wholeness, the inner essence and meaning in his subjects.

Often photographers will say, “Great capture or good catch.” Merton, however, wanted to receive the meaning in his subjects rather than just “capture” an image. Looking for the “hidden wholeness” in his subjects, Merton rejected this paternalistic domination of creation. Editor Paul Pearson refers to this as Merton’s “sacramental visions of the world” (4). Photographers Ralph Eugene Meatyard and John Howard Griffin, among others, became his mentors. Griffin lent Merton a camera or two, and he was off and running. He had what Zen photographers call a “good eye.” Tomasz Kiebzak’s book *Zen and the Art of Photography*⁸ summarizes the purpose of the kind of photography Merton was practicing: “The object of Zen discipline and modern photography should consist of acquiring a new viewpoint for looking into the essence of things – the opening of satori” (Kiebzak 5).

As I was preparing this review I came upon a midrash by Rabbi Arthur Waskow,⁹ in which he puts a different slant on his midrash of Abraham’s encounter with the three visitors in the oaks of Mamre. Waskow contends that the Hebrew “b” is properly translated as “in,” not “by.” Before Abraham could see the human/angelic visitors, he had to see Yahweh in the oaks of Mamre. In other words, Abraham had to see God in the oak trees. Likewise, Merton sought God in nature and received the gifts of nature

7. Bonnie Thurston, “This Spiritual Light – This Vision,” *The Merton Seasonal* 46.2 (Summer 2021) 36-37.

8. Tomasz Kiebzak, *Zen and the Art of Modern Photography: Finding Your Mind’s Eye* (Blurb.com, 2010); subsequent references will be cited as “Kiebzak” parenthetically in the text.

9. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, “When Abraham Sees God in Oak Trees” (22 October 2021); available at: www.theshalomcenter.org.

and contemplated their inscape. The photographs presented in this book make it clear that Merton found what he was seeking in nature and why he considered himself a contemplative photographer. Merton classed photographers with prophets and poets, both of whom are necessary to call us back to what is the Velveteen Rabbit's "really real." A good photographer also helps us to discover our true selves and, ultimately, God. As Merton writes in *No Man Is an Island*: "In an aesthetic experience, in the creation or the contemplation of a work of art, the psychological conscience is able to attain some of its highest and most perfect fulfillments" (*NMI* 34).

Beholding Paradise is a well-organized collection of Merton's photographs, many having commentaries on the adjoining page. Furthermore, the book is very timely. The first chapter deals with Merton and his Cistercian vow of stability. Unlike Celtic monks who would venture forth on pilgrimage in search of their place of resurrection, Trappists take a vow of stability. Stability in place meant looking for subjects in the home and on nearby property. For example, Merton enjoyed taking photos of the buildings at a nearby Shaker village, many of which are presented in the book. To me and many out-of-work photographers during the lock-down and isolation of the COVID 19 pandemic, Merton's contemplative photographs of subjects that were a part of his own enclosed existence show us how to focus on things immediately around us. Another striking example is his photo of the milk can on a stool on part of the front porch of his hermitage.

The chapters that follow exhibit photographs of hidden wholeness, friends and people radiating holiness, the American West and the Far East, and of Merton himself. One of my favorites is Merton playfully taking a picture of someone taking his picture. In the photos that Merton took during his travels beyond Gethsemani, such as those he took of the West Coast on his first extended trip out of the monastery in twenty-seven years, he was, in a sense, like those Celtic monks looking for his "place of resurrection." In the Far East, Merton continued to take photos and to send them back for developing. He was infatuated with the statues of the Buddha in Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka at the shrine of Gal Vihara. He was also deeply focused on "capturing" Kanchenjunga, a mountain in the Himalayas, and "quarreled" with the mountain as he struggled to experience its other side. He was able to resolve this struggle only when he accepted that from the side he was facing, the other side of the mountain could not be photographed.¹⁰

I am confident that Merton would reject what I call postcard photog-

10. For more on this subject, see Donald Grayston, "Merton's Quarrel with Kanchenjunga," *The Merton Seasonal* 11.2 (Spring 1986) 2-6.

raphy. When I teach photography classes, I tell my students that I want photographs that bring out the meaning in the subject. I instruct them to take time and carefully plan what it is that they are trying to convey. The contemplative photographer takes the time to receive the essence, the “hidden wholeness” of the subject.

The most useful aspect of the book is the opportunity to contemplate Merton’s photographs, much like the way the twentieth-century spiritual writer Henri Nouwen spent hours in St. Petersburg, Russia in front of Rembrandt’s *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Recently, Lindsay Boyer, author of *Centering Prayer for Everyone*, has urged us, like Nouwen and Merton, to practice *visio divina*, to seek God with the eyes of our hearts. She writes:

Visio divina is a form of divine seeing in which we prayerfully invite God to speak to our hearts as we look at an image. While *lectio divina* is a traditional way of reading a text with the ear of the heart, in *visio divina*, *lectio*’s visual cousin, we look at an image with the eye of the heart. As we gaze, present to an image without any particular agenda, we allow it to speak to us in words or wordlessly with a divine voice.¹¹

Beholding Paradise is essentially about seeing, as opposed to merely looking. Photographers will find excellent examples of subjects for contemplative photography such as an open door with light coming through, windows on buildings, tree stumps, Shaker buildings and furniture, to mention but a few. Contemplative people, who may or may not be photographers, will find a plethora of subjects for *visio divina*, and this contemplative practice will enrich their mystical journey.

I conclude this review with a koan-like statement by Merton that I believe sums up the quality of his photos showcased in this book: “If Zen has any preference, it is for glass that is plain has no color and is ‘just glass.’”

J. Patrick Mahon

THURSTON, Bonnie, *Shaped by the End You Live For: Thomas Merton’s Monastic Spirituality*, Foreword by Paul Quenon, OCSO (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), pp. xix, 166. ISBN 978-0-8146-8832-8 (paper) \$19.95.

In this insightful book, Bonnie Thurston turns our attention to Thomas Merton’s monastic worldview with the central claim: “if one does not understand Merton as a monk, one does

11. See www.lindsayboyer.com/vivio-divina. I refer to www.biloxidiocese.org/visio-divina for a discussion of *visio divina* and the five steps in the practice.