

SCOTT, Sophronia, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*, Foreword by Barbara Brown Taylor (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021), pp. xi, 202. ISBN 978-1-5064-6496-1 (paper) \$17.95.

Sophonria Scott's story of her first encounter with the work of Thomas Merton is both amusing and instructive. Intrigued by a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* she had heard during a lecture she attended, reflections on the arrival of dawn, the *point vierge* when the birds ask if it is time to be once again,<sup>1</sup> she tried to track down the source, having to use interlibrary loan because her own local library didn't have the book, only to discover that the very passage she had been looking for had been torn out of the copy she received. Rather than discouraging her, this temporary setback became the catalyst for a deepened, continuing fascination. If someone else had found these pages "precious enough . . . that they had kept them – well, it seemed like I was at the beginning of something, something that required more of my time and attention" (5). She soon got her own copy of *Conjectures*, then of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and before long plunged into the seven volumes of journals in which she met "a kindred spirit, perhaps even a friend" (7).

The fruits of this ongoing encounter are shared in the "everyday conversations" on central issues of contemporary life between two apparently quite disparate figures, the celebrated monk whose life ended near the conclusion of the tumultuous 1960s, and an African-American woman who had just been born around that very time, a wife, mother, novelist, essayist whose passion for writing and for spiritual growth matches Merton's own. Like her conversation partner, Scott weaves together reflections on scripture, references to popular culture, citations of favorite authors, personal anecdotes, along with insightful responses to Merton's own writings, especially the journals, to create a vibrant testimonial to the continued relevance and vitality of someone a friend once referred to as "her boy" (1, 186), as well as testimony to her own mature Christian wisdom and its practical application to the challenges of and to a life of faith in the present age. Her approach is explicitly not that of a scholar, providing detached analysis of a text or a topic, but of a fellow seeker, a companion on the journey, willing to share aspects of her own story as she muses on aspects of his. She provides enough specific background information to acquaint readers unfamiliar with Merton with his life and

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1. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 117-18; this is the opening passage of Part Three: "The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air."

work, and enough personal interpretation to engage even those whose knowledge of Merton may surpass her own. She sometimes addresses Merton directly, frequently expressing appreciation for his insights but also willing on occasion to note what she perceives as his shortcomings, as when she criticizes his “indecision and equivocation” during his recurring vocation crises, which became, she states frankly, “so tiresome” (70). This frankness extends to her own failings and doubts as well, and also to recounting some of the critical events of her own life, most strikingly as the mother of a third-grader at Sandy Hook Elementary School at the time of the horrific mass shooting there, one of the victims being her son Tain’s closest friend. The resulting dual portrait is a stimulating record of a meeting of minds, and of spirits, that both recognizes and transcends differences of place and time, of gender, race, vocation, concrete experience, to form a bond, a community, in which the reader is invited to participate.

After the introductory chapter, “This Monk Who Follows Me Around” (1-15), subtitled “Getting to Know Thomas Merton,” the book proceeds both thematically and chronologically, considering a series of topics corresponding, though not in any rigid fashion, to stages in the progression of Merton’s own spiritual journey, principally as revealed in the journals. Prompted by Merton’s renunciation of his own, rather scanty, worldly goods at the time of his entrance into the monastery, Scott reflects on the temptation to be defined by, even possessed by, one’s possessions, idol worship in updated form (c. 2: “Alexa, Where’s My Stuff” [17-33]). She then examines the genuine value of one’s own work, in particular for both Merton and herself one’s own writing, and the dangerous distortions of ambition, self-glorification as a substitute for giving glory to the true source of all creativity (c. 3: “Your Work and God’s Work” [35-48]). Her own trip to Gethsemani and exploration of the monastery grounds “in the footsteps of Thomas Merton” (49) provides the context for her reflections on the divine presence in nature, and on what she describes as Merton’s three-fold response of reverence for the earth, attention and attunement to the life-giving rhythms of the weather, and respect for the specificity of the manifold varieties of flora and fauna reflected in their names (c. 4: “I Am a Bird, Waiting” [49-64]). She makes the (obligatory) stop at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, but focuses more on the aftermath of epiphany, what sustains faith when the brightness of all those “shining like the sun” is no longer so immediately evident (c. 5: “When Faith Tires” [65-77]). Scott then considers the gift of friendship as it appears in Merton’s life and in her own, the recognition of true friendship as a spiritual gift in itself and a reflection and revelation of one’s own gifts

to be shared with others, incarnated in experiences and expressions of community that transcend institutional, geographical and religious boundaries (c. 6: “The Soul Selects Its Society” [79-95]). Merton’s (re)turn to the world in the final decade of his life, with a compassion grounded in contemplative awareness, his willingness to be a sign of contradiction to the forces of division and inhumanity, even as he recognizes his own failures and imperfections, is presented by Scott as an inspiration “to step forward in my own vulnerable, broken, unkind, silly humanity,” an encouragement to “keep writing” though she like Merton “do[es] not claim to have all the answers” (111) (c. 7: “Human in an Inhuman Age” [97-113]). The mystery and the discipline of prayer, solitary and communal, spontaneous and structured, are then considered, highlighting the author’s own sense of how prayers are answered, her eventual recognition as an adopted Episcopalian of the value of *The Book of Common Prayer* as a resource for her own prayer, and her discovery of the power of icons to draw one in to prayer (c. 8: “The Hermione Granger of Gethsemani” [115-33]). The chapter on racism notes the likelihood of “doubt whether a cloistered white man who lived in Kentucky in the middle part of the last century would have anything useful to offer” (135), but like many other African-American commentators strongly affirms that with regard to race, Merton “got it” (139), that he understood and excoriated the racist underpinnings of American society and the need for structural as well as personal transformation, that he knew the Black freedom movement at its most profound and most characteristic level was about the liberation of oppressed and oppressor alike, a vision that resonates with her, particularly as the mother of a bi-racial teenaged son, because it was “about dignity, respect, a shared humanity, and ultimately, our hearts and souls” (135) (c. 9: “Hopeful Eyes on a Hopeless Issue” [135-50]). In her penultimate chapter Scott sympathetically considers Merton’s late-life romantic relationship with the nurse who cared for him after his back surgery in 1966, focusing particularly on Merton’s emergence “from an experience in which you’d been immature, giddy, perhaps even kind of crazy, to discuss and not deny the glory of love and how it connects us to God,” adding “I’m not sure I would otherwise have had patience with your work” (157) (c. 10: “Swiping Right in the Marketplace” [151-63]). The book concludes with the conclusion of Merton’s life, a meditation not only on the monk’s death and the deaths of her own close relatives and friends, but on death itself, the ultimate surrender of self, the letting-go of both the one who leaves and those left behind, but also an affirmation of the continued presence of the beloved to the mind and heart and spirit, an insight brought home to her in a special way on her visit to her soul-

friend's own hermitage home, where she read aloud the very passage on the awakening valley "that had brought me to him" for the first time (182) (c. 11: "The Sight of the Harbor" [165-84]).

Like any, or all, of us, Scott doesn't inevitably hit all the right notes, or inevitably doesn't hit all the right notes. In particular, one might question whether her discussion of Merton's prayer in chapter 8 reflects a sufficiently broad and deep acquaintance with this dimension of his life. Drawing on various journal passages in which the monk laments his shortcomings in prayer, she uncharacteristically lectures him on the subject, emphasizing his failure to "soar," his "woefully ineffective" "wing-flapping" (124), comparing him, rather incongruously, to the brilliant but overly bookish Hermione of the Harry Potter series, who needs to get in better touch with her intuitive side (see 121). Would her evaluation have been different, at least more nuanced, if she had taken into account the famous description of his prayer that Merton wrote to his Pakistani friend Abdul Aziz in 1966,<sup>2</sup> or his frequent expression of his preference for the desert, for emptiness, darkness, naked faith, the void, as the true "climate" of contemplative prayer? One can at least say that this chapter is more valuable for what it reveals about Scott's own vibrant prayer life than for what it claims about Merton's.

Even here, however, this bold willingness to engage in creative dialogue with Merton on matters that really do matter, to respond honestly and thoughtfully to his ideas and experiences, and articulate her own in the process, makes *The Seeker and the Monk* a refreshing, enjoyable, indeed unique contribution to the vast secondary literature on Thomas Merton, so recognized by the International Thomas Merton Society's 2021 "Louie" award for a work that "has bought provocative insight and fresh direction to Merton studies." The opportunity to listen in on these "everyday conversations," to share vicariously in this spiritual and spirited exchange, is, one can confidently state, far from being an everyday occurrence.

Patrick F. O'Connell

RAAB, Joseph Quinn, *Opening New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), pp. xvii, 163. ISBN: 978-1-7252-7936-0 (paper) \$23.00.

When I read a film review, I don't want the reviewer to reveal the entire plot of the movie. That would ruin the fun. I want to know just enough

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2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 63-64.