

Pennington's *Thomas Merton Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom*, the only full scale biography from a monastic perspective.

It is precisely, in this area of monastic perspective that I found Kountz's contention that in John Howard Griffin's published writings on Thomas Merton "we have the most compelling account yet produced..." of Merton's story. It is from "the monastic sensibility" that Merton worked and which Griffin seemed to grasp so well, says Kountz. This insight is appealing and one hopes that Kountz might expand upon it in future study.

The volume contains an editor's preface by the dean of American religious studies, Martin E. Marty. Listed too are the other twenty-two volumes in the Series. The book provides notes on the chapters, an incomplete bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and an index.

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Ralph Eugene Meatyard  
FATHER LOUIE:  
PHOTOGRAPHS OF THOMAS MERTON  
New York: Timken Publishers, 1991  
108 pages - \$20.00

Reviewed by Deba P. Patnaik

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This is not the usual kind of portrait-photography book. It contains fifty Merton portraits by Meatyard, two Meatyard images by Merton, eleven pages of mutual correspondence, a two-page Meatyard Eulogy plus a four-page reminiscence about Merton, two pages of Barry Magid's Preface, a ten-page Note on the photographer by his son, Christopher, and 14 pages of Guy Davenport's essay, "Tom and Gene." Neither Thomas Merton nor Ralph Eugene Meatyard was an ordinary individual.

Meatyard and Merton were instantly drawn to each other the first time they met at the Abbey of Gethsemani in January 1951. The same year, Merton wrote Ed Rice about Meatyard as "this marvelous photographer friend."<sup>1</sup> In his *Restricted Journals*, he commends the artist's work—"marvelous, arresting, visionary things. Most

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), p. 292. Hereafter referred to in the text as *RJ*.

haunting and suggestive, mythical, photography I ever saw."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Meatyard's imagery is particularly mythical, suggestive and visionary.

Though an optician by vocation, Meatyard's calling was photography. Over a span of nineteen years—1953 to 1972—he produced an impressive body of original images of a wide range of subjects and experimentations: Portraits, People, Interior and Exterior, Landscapes, Cemetery Sculpture, Masks-Dolls-Props, Light, Motion-Sound, No-Focus, and Zen. When I recently looked at his photographs in his archives in Lexington, KY, and went back again to his published works—*The Unforeseen Wilderness*, *Emblems & Rites*, and *Family Album of Lucybelle Crater*—definite conceptual and stylistic patternings emerged as pivotal. They are: his sense of the mystery in the visible, "what is not always seen,"<sup>3</sup> and portraiture as significant to his photographic expression.

Meatyard, I suggest, attempts to portray the essential reality in and behind a face, landscape, an emotion or object, and, in so doing he also tries to discover his own reality, his own self. Focal-plane shifts, long multiple exposures, tonal value manipulations, and created scenes constitute the technical repertoire of his tableaux of abstractions and juxtapositions. His Motion-Sound images of trees, forests, and gardens not only signify nature's potency, but more importantly evoke the shifting reality and paradox inherent in its diurnal rhythm of growth, change, and decay. The No-Focus and Light on Water series are yet another attempt to delineate imagination and the self as projected in an image; in fact, the title of photographs in the series are "Notes on the Keyboard of Imagination, 1962," and "Portrait of the Self, 1959." The abstraction in his twig images (named Zen Twigs by Christopher Meatyard) is an evocative expression and distillation of pure feelings, emotion, and mood. This distillation is most forceful in Meatyard's fabricated scenes dramatically arranged by his mode of juxtaposition of the natural, the absurd, and the bizarre. The Lucybelle photographs involving his family and friends with masks, often identifiable and other times not so, make a provocative effort to define the quintessential reality of being. His self-portraits and portraits of others exemplify the same approach. At the same time, he realizes the ambiguity, paradox, and mystery

2. Thomas Merton, "Restricted Journals", January 1967. (Cited by Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

3. Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Manuscript for an exhibition prospectus for *The Unforeseen Wilderness*.

contained in being and reality, tellingly captured in the picture of his one-armed friend, Cranston Ritchie, with a mannequin and a mirror, or the photographs of children with masks. Meatyard's photographic corpus is ultimately a unique study in portraiture.

It is relevant to talk about Thomas Merton in relation to photography. Stylistically, his photographs are different from those of Meatyard's in the sense that the images are straightforward shots without any manipulation. While the optician's are emblematic, the monk's are iconic—images which embody "the inner truth of things,"<sup>4</sup> and mirror "the glory of the invisible God."<sup>5</sup> His photographs have a "transparence" that experiences "the luminousness of the thing in itself."<sup>6</sup> They are, for Merton, "infused contemplation."<sup>7</sup> In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he notes, "The image is a new and different reality, and of course, it does not convey an impression of some object, but the mind of the subject...."<sup>8</sup> He returns to the same idea in his *Asian Journal* when he watched in wonder and reverence the majestic and inspiring mountain, Kanchenjunga. He comments, "the best photography is aware, mindful,"<sup>9</sup> and "beyond shadow and disguise" (*AJ*, p. 236). Edward Weston would say the "quintessence of the thing itself,"<sup>10</sup> is revealed, and Merton "the hidden wholeness."<sup>11</sup> Merton's photography acquires a distinct kind of abstraction and minimalism as does Meatyard's, even though neither had any influence on the other. Formal differences aside, one can detect congruences in both of them. Merton's "pure seeing" (*CGB*, p. 307) parallels Meatyard's notion of "what is not always seen." Metaphoric communication for both is not a way of giving the thing a name that belongs to something else, but a way of transcending the normal referentiality of the photographic language. What is para-

4. Thomas Merton, *Notes on Art and Worship*, (mimeographed, Gethsemani), p.3.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews & McMeel, 1977), p. 17.

6. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1966), p. 13.

7. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?*, (Notre Dame: St. Mary's Press, 1948), p. 7.

8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (NY: Doubleday, 1968), p. 148. Hereafter referred to in the text as *CGB*.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, (NY: New Directions, 1975), p. 159. Hereafter referred to in the text as *AJ*.

10. Edward Weston, "Seeing Photographically," *The Complete Photographer*, vol. 9, #49, pp. 3200-3206.

11. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*, (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962), p. 1.

mount for both of them is the very act of photographing. Meatyard's stubborn refusal to explain or comment on his photographs, his notes on the process, his experimentations, and his subtle use of abstraction to convey the universal illustrate the point. With Merton, it is evident in his diverse writings, be it on Zen, cave art, creativity, Rilke or Muir. A scintillating essay on Roland Barthes demonstrates his admiration for 'writing degree zero,' and explains Barthes' concept of "gestus" as beginning "only when all meaningful postures have been abandoned, when all the obvious 'signs' of art have been set aside."<sup>12</sup> This idea of stripping off and emptying is at the core of Merton's creative and religious life, as well as of his concept of being and personhood.

Thomas Merton holds, "the exterior self as a mask," and, that the masks we wear "may well be a disguise" for our "inner self" and God.<sup>13</sup> Cistercian monk-hermit, he was also a poet, writer, a loyal friend, bit of a clown who joked about his facial resemblances with Picasso, Jean Genet, and Henry Miller, and called himself by various names—Father Ludawhiskey, Beppo Zampillione, Harvey Ancumerario, etc. He took to calligraphy, drawing, and photography. His musical taste ranged from the western classical to jazz and Bob Dylan. Cloistered, he was a social activist through his writings. He describes himself as a "kind of maverick and, in fact, ended as a hermit."<sup>14</sup> He did not fit into "neat categories," as he rightly points out to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr (*RJ*, p. 220). In *My Argument with the Gestapo*, this multifaceted and multifaced eremite expresses his struggle with identity by a pointed question to himself, "How would you like to be looking? Have you thought?"<sup>15</sup>

Ralph Eugene Meatyard's sensitive and evocative portraits present ascetic Merton picnicking with lay friends, writer Merton reading from his own literary works silhouetted in a room, hermit Merton out in the open standing in the fields, wood, under trees ("I exist under trees. I walk in the woods out of necessity."<sup>16</sup>) We see him in monk's robe, in jeans, in a T-shirt. Some of the most

12. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essay of Thomas Merton*, (NY: New Directions, 1981), pp. 144-145.

13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (NY: New Directions, 1961), p. 296. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSOC*.

14. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), p. 12.

15. Thomas Merton, *My Argument With the Gestapo*, (NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 512.

16. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 33. Hereafter referred to in the text as *DS*.

expressive images are those of the intense Merton (pp.14, 15,31,60), the smiling Trappist (p.38), of Merton playing the bongo, puckish cenobite with a raised thyrsus (p.19), and Merton with the thyrsus and his face lifted upward. There is Merton in his habit, hooded, a barn behind him, staring far away into the woods quietened by the fading light—a picture of silence and solitude.

The most intriguing portraits, however, are the blurred, multi-exposure, and superimposed images, totally different from those taken by others such as Ed Rice, James Forest, or John Howard Griffin. They are also the most challenging ones in the book. "When," Merton asserts, "one is too intent on 'being himself' he runs the risk of impersonating shadows" (*DS*, p. 31). Are these images a visual representation of Merton's remark, as well as of his struggle to empty himself of masks and shadows—"the created person?" (*DS*, p. 28). Quite possibly, Meatyard's camera, set to see in a certain way so that much is left to chance, suggests the futile attempt to capture kaleidoscopic Merton's "naked face." Perhaps, the portraits are an expressive and evocative gesture toward the universal in Merton. Man, "not limited to form. He is more./He can attain formlessness," are the poet's words in "Wholeness."<sup>17</sup> Or, is Meatyard trying to explore Merton's "compelling necessity...to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature" (*DS*, p. 33). Through the monk, the photographer might as well be trying to embrace the necessity of his own nature. How would he like to be looking and what is the compelling necessity of his own nature are haunting questions for Thomas Merton. And the greatly photographed contemplative gives his own answer, "There Christ develops your life into Himself like a photograph" (*NSOC*, p. 162).

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Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.

**PRAYER AND COMMITMENT IN THOMAS MERTON  
PROPHECY AND COMMITMENT IN THOMAS MERTON**

Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes, 1991

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Reviewed by Ruth M. Fox, O.S.B.

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17. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, (NY: New Directions, 1970), p. 931.