

date. While the 1958 project for a book entitled *Art and Worship* never saw fruition, it is clear that art had a very central place in his life: as a source of creative pleasure, as an aid to meditation, as a way of celebrating God's creativity in nature, as a stimulus to his writing and thought, and as an aspect of familial identity.

Which brings us around to *Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings*. Jonathan Montaldo has made a selection of 92 drawings by Merton, which he has accompanied by an equal number of prayers or addresses to God, drawn from many examples of Merton's writing. The drawings he has selected come mainly from the 1950s, and are primarily drawings of heads. Most are done in a style strongly reminiscent of Matisse's graphic works and more particularly, his black and white decorations for the chapel of St Paul de Vence. As may be evident from the remarks above, I do not think that these representational drawings are consistently the best of Merton's practice. It is true, they do often possess an engaging economy of line and a nice balance of accents, but overwhelmingly, they look like pale reflections of the styles they are descendants of. Many are of women – there is a Mary Magdalene which looks appealingly like the singer Connie Francis – but for the most part these large-eyed, sentimental Virgin Marys, nuns and saints do not reward repeated examination. In many instances the sweetness of the drawings seem at odds with the gritty message of the prayers – the struggle for faith, for worthiness in the eyes of God, for religious authenticity. In other cases, the effort to match word to text falls short: a drawing of a featureless face is awkwardly and almost comically matched with a prayer starting 'Oh God, my God, why am I so mute?'

Montaldo describes the heads of women as 'powerful and mysterious' and argues that they reflect Merton's 'growing appreciation of women and the feminine in his life'. I find it hard to reconcile that view with the dull, placid, passive visages that fill these pages.

There are many Thomas Mertons. The Merton presented in *Dialogues with Silence* happens not to be one that resonates with me. The drawings illustrated in the book are tentative precursors to those housed at Bellarmine done in the 1960s, many of which show a more authentic, energetic and spiritually mature artistic expression. More work needs to be done in this fascinating area of Merton studies.

Peter Morrin

LAUGHLIN, John, *Reading Thomas Merton: A Guide to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2000), pp. 218. ISBN: 0-7388-5613-4. \$31.99.

As the title of this book suggests John Laughlin's book has been written to introduce readers to Thomas Merton, both to his life and his writings, and to provide some evaluation of the books and other materials available by, and about, Merton. Laughlin's approach is broad, including sections on Merton websites, tapes of Merton's conferences, dissertations about him, the best places to purchase books, and what to expect when visiting a monastery. It is described in the publisher's blurb as 'an enticing guide through the forest of Merton literature' and as 'the perfect starting place for anyone who wanted to read Merton but did not know where to begin'. The error in the publisher's blurb, surely it should read 'didn't know where to begin', is a foretaste for the reader of what is to come on opening the pages of this book.

*Reading Thomas Merton* is littered with errors, factual and grammatical, from beginning to end. The opening paragraph of Laughlin's biographical section about Thomas Merton begins by describing him as 'a French nationalist' (p. 13), as opposed to a French citizen because of his birth in France; he gives his reader the date of Owen's death as 'October 4, 1931' (p. 28) instead of January 1931, although he later uses the correct date in his chronology of Merton's life (p. 86); the spelling of Gethsemani is correct in the caption of one photograph and wrong in another; more than once he describes the Merton scholar, and founding editor of *The Merton Annual*, Victor Kramer as 'a longtime friend' of Merton's (pp. 46, 173) and yet Kramer never met or corresponded with Merton. Similarly almost every single website address (url) and e-mail address quoted is either out of date or wrong. Everyone who uses the Internet is familiar with the speed it changes and the way websites come and go. However, the number of out-of-date sites, along with the typographical mistakes in an area most unforgiving of such mistakes, suggests a slovenliness that should not have found its way into print.

Besides the problem with the errors in this book I did not find that it was a book that would inspire me to go away and read more about Thomas Merton. Laughlin's style of writing is tedious and torpid and really at no point does he allow the genius of Merton's work and thought to shine through. His biography of Merton, largely based on Michael Mott's biography, is unbalanced. Laughlin includes a complete chapter on Merton's 1966 affair with the student nurse, but only a paragraph on Merton's interest and involvement in the social issues of his day.

The lack of balance in Laughlin's biographical account of Merton is evident throughout the book. In the second part of the book, as Laughlin looks at Merton's work, and works about him, I found the book became more and more unreadable, presenting lists of Merton's books, of books and dissertations about him, cassette recordings of his conferences and organizations which bear his name with a decreasing amount of evaluation of the resources being presented. His section on tapes and videos by and about Merton reads like a Credence Cassettes catalog with no attempt to evaluate any of the selection he has included.

Items are placed in the wrong categories – the audio version of Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift's book *Meditations with Merton* and the Paul Wilkes film, *Merton: A Film Biography*, were included in the section on tape and videos by Merton. Similarly, John Blattner's book, *Mornings with Thomas Merton: Readings and Reflections*, was included in the section on Merton's poetry yet it does not include any poetry just selections from three early prose works, *The Waters of Siloe*, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and *The Sign of Jonas*. The further I delved into this book the more I was left with the feeling that the author had not properly researched his material.

The overall idea of this book is laudatory but it falls far short of that ideal. The publisher of *Reading Thomas Merton*, Xlibris, is a vanity press and the lack of an editorial pen is only too evident in this book. William H. Shannon's book '*Something of a Rebel*': *Thomas Merton, his Life and Works* still remains the best introduction for newcomers to Merton and the most 'enticing guide through the forest of Merton literature' currently available.

Paul M. Pearson



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