

WALDRON, Robert, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011), pp. ix +207. ISBN 978-0-8091-4684-0 (paper) \$17.95.

In his poem "Posterity," Philip Larkin gives an acerbic glance at the view of a future mythical biographer who will use his research work on Larkin after the poet's death to further future career prospects: "Just let me put this bastard on the skids"; and asked by a colleague what his research subject (Larkin) is like, the biographer replies: "One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys."<sup>1</sup> The poem reminds the reader that the subject is always at the mercy of the biographer and their motives. Whilst in no way suggesting that Waldron has approached the writing of this book with career prospects in mind, the reading of the book does nonetheless raise the question: why write this book? What is Waldron trying to tell us the readers? He writes in the preface that the book is "a Jungian interpretation of the life and the work of the Trappist monk . . . . My only hope is that I will indeed shed some light on Thomas Merton, a very complicated man who deserves the efforts of attentive, close reading" (vii). Does the book shed some light? Well, for this reviewer the answer is "no."

In the preface Waldron explains his lack of credentials for writing the book (he is not a trained psychotherapist or the equivalent, but has read Jung's work), and in Thomas Sheridan's recent spirited and insightful review of this book Waldron's lack of qualifications and flawed perspective are dealt with well. Sheridan also critically and skillfully unpicks some of Waldron's at times astonishingly wild and highly subjective interpretations of Merton.<sup>2</sup>

In his introduction, Waldron offers us his immediate "diagnosis": Merton's "life-long battle with depression . . . . commenced with his mother's death from cancer when he was six years old" (1). Merton's autobiography is "one of the best modern confessions of a depressive" (2). Straightaway the reader understands that this is no speculative, open-minded psychobiography but rather a delineated pathography. The subject is nailed, or to refer back to Larkin's verse, the biographer has "put the bastard on the skids." It's worth noting that in psychoanalytical training and practice, diagnoses or labels are rarely of interest to the analyst, for people are not diagnoses; rather the interest is always in what lies behind. The process is one of discovering and uncovering, with open and mutual exploration based on

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1. Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell Press / Faber & Faber, 1988) 170.

2. Thomas Sheridan, "Psyching Out Merton," Review of *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* by Robert Waldron, *The Merton Seasonal* 36.3 (Fall 2011) 26-33.

the psychodynamics of the relationship. Interpretations are offered from associations and interaction. Psychoanalytic (Freudian and post-Freudian) and analytical psychology (Jungian and post-Jungian) theory offer ways of thinking about the inner world, and would not be recommended as a pedantic template to apply to someone's life. In this book Waldron has misunderstood the analytical psychology approach which is often speculative, and misunderstood the way Jung approached and understood his thinking about the human condition that emerged from Jung's deep personal and professional experiences over a lifetime.

The book ploughs through more or less chronologically, with the first four chapters on Merton's childhood and adult life leading to his entering the monastery of Gethsemani. Much emphasis is placed on the child Merton reportedly fathered (indeed this is pursued all the way through). The second half of the book is about Merton's life as a monastic and takes us to his death. There is the inevitable (and it now seems for some recent biographers, obligatory) build-up to and highlighting of the relationship with the student nurse M. as bringing Merton healing. Each chapter draws on Merton's own writings, including his poetry, books and journals, and also on other biographers, and each is jam-packed with Waldron's interpretations as a pretend psychologist and sometimes as a pretend Jungian analyst. I have to mention here Waldron's breathtaking ticking off of Merton for practicing psychoanalysis on the novices: "His motive is pure, but he surely has no business posing even as an amateur psychologist" (62). This has to be one of the more blatant examples of projection by Waldron which litter the book. It's worth noting that as early as 1911 Freud began to publish papers to curb the danger of what he termed "wild" analysis from those he deemed "amateurish" – along the lines of a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately Merton, and indeed Jung, can both well survive Waldron's hatchet job, but an unwary reader new to both might get a very strange view of the thinking of Merton, and indeed the practice of Jungian psychology.

From my own perspective as a psychoanalytical psychotherapist and as someone who has had two lengthy and intensive Jungian analyses (the first a training analysis with a woman many years ago, and the second more recently with a male analyst), it is the astonishing way that Waldron interprets Merton's dreams and poetry that is the most destructive. A good psychobiography is not all about finding some childhood origin for adult

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3. See Sigmund Freud, "'Wild' Psycho-analysis" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1956-74) 11.219-27, and Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: J. M. Dent, 1988) 293-94.

behaviors,<sup>4</sup> but Waldron is determined to hammer home the early maternal loss and the effect on Merton's relationships with women. Translated into Waldron's misunderstanding of Jungian archetypes this means that Merton's "anima problem," "anima dilemma" and "anima projections," to name but a few of the phrases, are endlessly and repetitively flagged up. Sheridan rightly heavily criticizes Waldron's use of revisioned Jungian concepts, especially Waldron's identification of the feminine dimension (anima) with an actual woman or women.

This misunderstanding becomes at times absurd. So, for example, even Waldron is at a loss when he reports a Merton dream from 1966, a dream where there are a number of women. Here is a short extract from Waldron's interpretation:

There is an unflattering woman ("battle-axe type") and a girl who is *not* M. The anima is multifaced, confusing Merton [surely confusing Waldron!]. . . . In the dream, he moves from actual women to symbols of a woman: The woman is a luminous pink rose but discerned through a tangle of dark briars. . . . He must view his pink rose (M.) through the many obstacles (briars like spying monks, Abbot Fox . . .). . . . His mother's face then appears. . . . His student nurse visits him in the monastery. She obviously represents M., and he is brusque and rude. Is it because of the appearance of a negative anima . . . ? (163-64)

A Jungian analysis of dreams assumes that the dream images are all aspects of the dreamer's inner world, and that if there are representations of actual people they are representations of the dreamer's psyche. Each dream that Waldron includes is (one might say) analyzed to death. As Freud once so memorably is reported to have said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar."

Similarly Waldron misunderstands the concept of individuation by his reference to an "individuated person" (52) and to Merton as "the individuated man who survives the dark night of the soul" (151), to give two examples. Individuation is a process, not a state, and certainly in contemporary thinking is seen as somewhat problematic when viewed in this way as an idealized condition or achievement. I'm reminded of my second analyst, who once described a referral meeting at the London-based Society of Analytical Psychology many years ago, where all the top Jungian analysts of the time were present, and a request came from a potential analysand asking to be seen by an "individuated analyst." Here, as for Waldron, was an idealization of the theory with the assumption that an individuated state is indeed achievable. Instead the person had to be told that no one could

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4. See [www.williamtoddschultz.wordpress.com/what-is-psychobiography](http://www.williamtoddschultz.wordpress.com/what-is-psychobiography) [accessed 09/07/12].

claim this state, but he could be seen by a qualified analyst instead.

This critique of Waldron's usage of the theory brings me to my central reason for seeing this book as obfuscating the life of Merton rather than shedding light. Nowhere does the author seek to explore whether or not it is appropriate for such psychological theories to be applied in this evangelical and somewhat literal way to spiritual development. Instead, Waldron seems to assume that the two are the same. For example, he claims: "It is amazing how accurately Merton's journey correlates with Jung's theory of individuation, particularly his encounter with the anima archetype" (155). My response at this stage of the book is to disagree, for it is not at all amazing given the extraordinary insistence by Waldron to force the two into an artificial fit.

While Jungian theory and practice is most helpful for psychological understanding and development, it comes from a different context, and emphasizes something different from religious and spiritual development. The psychological and the spiritual are not always necessarily the same, though there is clear overlap. A recent essay by Rachel Blass helps to open up reflections on the difference and divide between religious and psychological worldviews. One approach understands the individual in terms of his or her connectedness or lack of connectedness to the spiritual/ethical nature of reality, and the other, a psychological view, does not necessarily take this reality either into account or as being the primary focus. "Instead the psychological worldview offers a notion of pathology and well-being that rests on psychological criteria alone."<sup>5</sup>

One of the central differences between the spiritual and psychological is the understanding of human suffering and how adverse life experiences can work towards deepening the focus of spiritual connectedness with God rather than the focus as the person's emotional wellbeing and ego-functioning. Jung, who was very interested in religion, tended in his theory to merge religious and psychological understandings to the extent that a religious form of understanding is superseded by the psychological. I think this is indeed what Waldron demonstrates in the text where the psychological and spiritual levels of discourse are seen either as equivalent or where the psychological takes precedence. As Buber put it in his critique of Jung, "Man does not deny a transcendent God; he simply dispenses with Him. . . . In his place he knows the soul, or rather the self."<sup>6</sup> This links with Waldron's repeated references to Jung's work

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5. Rachel B. Blass, "Sin and Transcendence Versus Psychopathology and Emotional Wellbeing: On the Catholic Church's Problem of Bridging Religious and Therapeutic Views of the Person," *Spiritus* 12.1 (Spring 2012) 24.

6. Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International,

*Modern Man in Search of a Soul* as his exemplar.<sup>7</sup>

A further criticism for the purposes of this review is about the writing style. Waldron writes in the present tense, contributing to the breathless and indigestible feel to the text. Prudent editing could have reduced some of the repetitions. For example in chapter 5 we are told three times that Merton did not write a journal between March 1953 and July 1956 (57, 58, 63). There are also inaccuracies: for example, the famous Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz is misnamed Maria von France (154) and she is referenced incorrectly as writing one of Jung's books, which would have surprised both of them (197).

So why reduce the life of Merton and the profound thinking of Jung to force a fit? The answer seems to lie in the author's need to show us, the readers, something new. Waldron says that Merton "deserves the efforts of attentive, close reading" (vii). This implicitly suggests that this has not happened up until now, and that Waldron alone can offer definitive insight where others have failed. Waldron's claim to nail Merton's inner pathology is not only wrong and patronizing, but seems to suggest then closure of all else. The irony is that Merton's very style of writing is the complete reverse. It is about opening things up, by giving space through his observations of – yes, himself – but always in the context of spirituality, and from that into the world and the environment. As David Belcastro notes, "Merton . . . enters into a relationship with his readers and through his writings awakens in us the *yes* that affirms life and the presence of God in our lives."<sup>8</sup> His writing is "autobiographical theology" and is about the human search and response to God.<sup>9</sup>

Merton's writings seem to invite each reader personally to attentive and close reading and so different identifications and subtle resonances and associations become available. One of Merton's attractions is the at-times enigmatic sense that we too understand him and that he somehow is able to reach us. This is not because he is a great saint or a great sinner, a depressive or someone full of cheer; perhaps it is just because he is – like us – "One of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys" trying to reach out to the "more than ourselves."

Fiona Gardner

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1988) 86, quoted by Blass (29).

7. C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

8. David Belcastro, "2009 Bibliographic Review: Beneath the Habit of Holiness," *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010) 256.

9. Gary Hall, "The Fiction of Merton," *The Merton Journal* 16.1 (Easter 2009) 10.