

Reviews

WILLIAMS, Rowan, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton*, Preface by Jim Forest, Afterword by Kallistos Ware (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), pp. 96. ISBN 978-189178578-8 (paper) \$19.95.

This carefully revised group of essays does an excellent job of examining some of the tensions which Merton experienced as a writer who functioned on so many different levels from the poetic to the political. The gathering – Author’s Foreword, five chapters and a poem, with a Preface by Jim Forest and an Afterword by Kallistos Ware – makes a compact collation of nine ways to ponder Merton and monasticism as a “provisional phenomenon,” necessary “until the city is truly baptized” (25). It would be possible to argue only someone as well-known as Archbishop Rowan Williams could warrant such a specialized small book, yet in an important way these explorations, done over a period of almost forty years, are immensely valuable.

In the “Author’s Foreword” (9-10), Williams focuses immediately on the gift of a writer whose skill was that he could assume so many poses. “Repeatedly, when you are inclined to exasperation at Merton’s ability to dramatize himself in yet another set of borrowed clothes, you are brought up by his own clear-eyed acknowledgement that this is what he is doing” (9). The fact is, Williams’ five essays and poem accomplish a similar kind of thing. Reading Merton from 1973 to 2011 allows this sophisticated interpreter to assume different roles as he encounters the changing Merton. I myself remember being given a copy of *Raids on the Unspeakable*¹ in December of 1966 and at first not quite knowing what to make of it. Now I perceive its timelessness, having reread that non-classifiable book many times, because Merton could assume so many different roles there. It is lyrical, magisterial, personal, often surprising. It is a book about what Williams calls our “being-in-Christ” (31).

All of the best work of Merton, Williams wisely sees (early, in the 1948 autobiography, and later throughout the mature journals) is “like [that of so] many great religious poets and autobiographers, [used] to exorcise rather than indulge fantasy” (9). And so whenever one returns to Merton, the writing becomes both his personal record and a record cleansed of the personal. We can see his story as our story. Williams explains that

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

Merton's gift, "a silent action," is to draw readers into his story so that his seeking of God becomes our story too.

Wisely chosen as authors of the "Preface" (11-13) and "Afterword" (87-89), Jim Forest and Kallistos Ware offer insights about how Merton provides ways of triangulating on big questions about poetry, contemplation and ecumenism by focusing on the particulars of language (11). Forest stresses that Williams, like Merton, regards the Christian life as incomplete "without a contemplative dimension." By looking at aspects of the contemplative life as fundamental ingredients in the Christian life, Merton informed us that "One of the major tasks of the contemplative life is the ongoing search for the actual self, the unmasked self, a self that is not merely the stage clothes and scripted sentences that we assemble and dutifully exhibit each day in the attempt to appear to be someone" (12). Forest alludes to the sacramental life and implies that in Merton we *all* (along with Williams) can possess a friendship. But like all friendship, this requires care and love and attention, and the longer one "knows" a friend the more valuable earlier insights become. Williams' poem, "Thomas Merton: summer 1966" (85), explores a time when Williams was sixteen. Placed at the conclusion of his text, it implies what a reader needs to know (in retrospect) about how each particular journey can be transformed into a universal one:

. . . You spent my sixteenth birthday
making a clean(ish) breast of things to the steel smile
of Abbot James. You staged show after show
for friends, then cancelled. Not to make sense is
what most matters.

We therefore learn from this 2002 poem how Merton does keep on teaching.

A similar thing is said in the "Afterword" lovingly presented by Ware. In the words of a tale by Martin Buber, we are reminded that each person needs two pockets "so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake the world was created,' and in his left: 'I am earth and ashes'" (87). Ware's point, and Williams', is that Merton knew, sang, celebrated, in all kinds of verbal costumes, creation as wonderful mystery. As human beings, above all, we need always to remember both our uniqueness and God's mercy. I had the pleasure of hearing Kallistos Ware speak at an Ecumenical Prayer Gathering in Atlanta in 2010, and his talk about the difficulties of ecumenism and dialogue was united by metaphor about his travel. Williams, so open to traditions beyond his own, and Merton, an

ecumenical pioneer, would have enjoyed that striking talk. With laughter, Ware remarked that he was thankful that at a recent Austrian ecumenical meeting heavy study briefcases were given to all the delegates. He held his up high for all to see and said, “We need these. . . . It will be a long journey” as we slowly learn to respect one another’s traditions.

Williams and Merton, both intensely respectful of the mystery of God’s love, as unfolded in language, know this. It is such wonder about mystery and linguistic accomplishment which is at the core of this group of essays. Williams’ middle article, “‘New Words for God’: Contemplation and Religious Writing” (43-51), is central to the book’s organization and to Rowan’s insights. I heard this dense piece delivered in 1998 at the Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at Oakham. What strikes me, now, after rereading, it is how compacted it is – in the best sense – and, when I heard it delivered and discussed, how modest and self-deprecating Williams seemed to be. What Williams reminds us of is that poetry was exceedingly important for Merton because it allows the “self” of the artist to escape. Here Williams is celebrating “religious writing” as an activity fundamental to “allow truth, allow God” (47). We “see” God by forgetting about self.

Insights throughout these five essays continually demonstrate how Williams’ engagements, open and ecumenical, provide an approach to Merton’s monastic commitment to entering into wisdom. Williams is building a wedge to reposition our understanding. His critical acumen serves to move a sometimes opaque theory about contemplativeness (embedded in Merton’s life-long fascination with language) into an illuminating tool which can transform our grasp of mysticism.

In Merton the gift for seeking to lose the false self can seem, at times, to be a fragile template for waiting. In other cases, it is a magnifying glass of trust, concentrating the rays of the givenness of this world into glimpses of the unfathomable Mystery of God’s entry in humankind’s history and consciousness. What Williams does is to celebrate Merton in such a way that we know we are also co-creators in this mystery of the self becoming ever more aware of the hiddenness of God within each person. Williams calls this pattern “the theme of the illusory self” (17).

The “illusory self” is the person we must keep forgetting, but the paradox remains that only through the “concrete and the historical” do we learn this mystery and truth of unknowing. In Williams’ words, employing Merton’s use of a Hindu writer on the function of poetry, “‘to make us aware of . . . dharma,’” the poetic voice makes us aware that “There is no isolated, pure, and independent ‘I,’ but there is a vast and universal web of ‘I’s, in which I have a true and right place” (18). Merton’s gift,

then, is to show us he is learning to know his “real place” (19).

What Merton found of great value in pondering God’s presence *via* Islam and thus to

‘being a son of this instant’ – in the phrase Merton adapts from Ibn Abbad – is encountering and entering into that elusive ‘there before us’ quality of God’s action, that active reality – or indeed, to use the scholastic language which was not at all alien to Merton’s thinking, that ‘pure act’ which is both beyond memory and fantasy. (47)

Such presence, too, is what Merton found so significantly examined in the Russian Orthodox theologians who informed his own study in the mid-sixties. Williams’ doctoral mentor, and Merton’s good friend, Donald Allchin, knew that in all Christian religions (Anglican, Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox) we celebrate the wonder of God’s presence. It is so appropriate, therefore, that Allchin and Merton were together on that fateful day of Martin Luther King’s assassination (see the interview in *The Merton Annual* 17²).

Williams wisely informs us that for Merton, and for all theologians open to mystery, an “attunement to the ‘pure act’ of God [is what] seems to be fundamental.” Thus, to study the article “‘Bread in the Wilderness’: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov” is a reward and revelation. Again, much is packed into this study, and Williams was doing this type of work (which grew out of his doctoral dissertation) in the middle 1970s, thirty-five years before Christopher Pramuk’s *Sophia*.³ Williams asserts: “Contemplation is not a religious exercise but an ontological necessity in the intense *personalism* of Christian faith, the encounter of the human person with the Divine Council of Persons” (30-31). The importance of this insight is a key for all of us to learn, and then to refuse to accept labels as well. Williams recognizes, as did Merton, that to see into the wonder and mercy of God one has, to some degree, to forget roles, rules and labels. This was also Merton’s basic insight in his references to Karl Barth in *Conjectures*,⁴ and thus to Williams’ essay about God’s pleasure in humankind. “‘Not Being Serious’: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth” (71-82) is a careful consideration of Merton’s

2. “‘A Very Disciplined Person’ from Nelson County: An Interview with Canon A. M. Donald Allchin about Merton,” conducted by Victor A. Kramer, edited by Glenn Crider, *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004) 235-55.

3. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 3-4, 8-9, 10-11, 303-305, 311, 317-18.

many references to Barth and wisdom.

In these many essays Williams reminds us that for Merton to function well as a monk, in a very real sense he had to refuse “the *role* of ‘monk’ or ‘artist’” (37). Then it begins to be possible to just be.

Perhaps the most insightful piece here is “‘The Only Real City’: Monasticism and Social Vision” (55-68), given as an address in 2004. Williams does an extended analysis of some related entries from *Turning Toward the World*⁵ to demonstrate Merton’s engagement with questions about responsibilities of the monk-writer within a world he triangulated upon by reading Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*.⁶ Here Williams’ point is that it is so easy for the monk (or any believer, or professional Christian writer) to forget about what language can do: “the difficulties Merton faces are very like those analysed so unforgettably by Bonhoeffer in his prison letters; the words of faith are too well-known to believers for their meaning to be knowable” (65). Ultimately, Williams insists Merton knew he (we) had to be wary of language, yet only through language can we see what is real. Our first responsibility is to authenticity (see also 24-25).

This beautiful book will stimulate much good discussion. It is quite important that one of its motifs is examination of Merton’s continuing skepticism about the effectiveness of religious language. It is therefore quite appropriate that the dust cover is a beautiful reproduction of the façade of Canterbury Cathedral “painted by Thomas Merton’s father” and now “housed in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University” (back cover). What better way to suggest the immense power of art to communicate the strength of God who must remain a mystery we apprehend in silence?

Victor A. Kramer

DEKAR, Paul R., *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. xviii + 242. ISBN 978-1-60608-970-5 (paper) \$29.00.

Although Thomas Merton died decades before the Internet would become a household term, let alone a widespread commodity, before women, men and children would access nearly infinite amounts of information from just about anywhere thanks to “smartphone” technology, and before the

5. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).