

a Fifth Argentine Thomas Merton Conference where the circle will be even wider, but Merton will still be at the center, holding it all together.

Mark C. Meade

QUENON, Paul, OCSO, *A Matter of the Heart: A Monk's Journal, 1970-2022*, Foreword by Fenton Johnson, Afterword by James Finley (Rhinebeck, NY: MonKFISH, 2024), pp. xiv + 149. ISBN: 978-1-958972-41-0 (paper) \$23.99.

In his afterword to Brother Paul Quenon's latest book, James Finley recommends sitting in a quiet place and reading it as an exercise in *lectio divina*, which Finley describes as “a way of reading that embodies intimate intimations of God personally speaking to you in the words being read.” What you’re looking for, he says, are “phrases and insights that strike you as beautiful,” those that “provide insights into aspects of God’s oneness with you in the gift and miracle of your day-to-day life” (142). Finley’s recommendation is the perfect approach to a collection of journal entries that Quenon tells us are not in chronological order except in being grouped by decades. This structural choice might be frustrating to readers looking for a clear through line. But if you’re able to free yourself from the need to find connections between the seemingly random thoughts and insights here, the book becomes something like the night full of stars Quenon writes about: stimulating lights of various magnitudes stirring us in the stillness of our own searching lives.

Unlike Thomas Merton, under whom he was a novice at Gethsemani, Quenon admits to not being an “avid journaler” (xiv). He says he only began to journal because Merton told his novices doing so was a good idea. With Merton, you can follow any number of threads from entry to entry, reading them like an autobiography or even a novel. Quenon, on the other hand, writes more like the poet he is, exploring an idea or an image and then letting it go after a paragraph, or at most, a couple of pages. In fact, from time to time he inserts his poems, such as one called “Untimely Elegy for Thomas Merton” that includes these lines:

Now is when I'll write it down and say –  
say this:  
he always said he was nothing, or wanted to be,  
so, there's nothing to complain about  
if nothing's left of Thomas Merton.  
Nothing was there to begin with. (36)

Being nothing and wanting nothing other than connection to God is a

common theme in Quenon's book and in his writing in general. (His previous book, a memoir, was titled *In Praise of the Useless Life*.<sup>1</sup>) In his introduction, Quenon describes monastic life as simply "a beauty lived daily" (xiv), and much of what makes his book worth reading is how he renders that beauty. He gives us the internal dialogue and observations of someone who has spent his life living quietly among nature and others dedicated to God in the same way he is.

Some of the book's most memorable passages are those in which he gives quick but penetrating pictures of other monks. There's Fr. Roger, for example, "one of those characters favored by Fr. Louis [Merton]." Fr. Roger, Quenon writes, "would relate to you by standing and leaning toward you with his head tilted and eyes lowered. Fr. Louis said if he liked you a lot he would lean way over" (68). And Fr. Stephen, who was so humble that after he gave flowers to the mother of another monk and she began to correspond with him, he couldn't believe "the mother of such a high intelligence as Fr. Chrysogonus would show a liking for him" (78).

Quenon gives glimpses of Merton too, with obvious fondness for the ways he enlivened the other monks' lives and his kindnesses toward the novices in his care. "It sometimes happened," he writes, "that [Merton] would get to the Offertory, find that the wine and water cruets had not been set out – my neglect. In this case, he was not short of patience and stood and waited" (136). (The book's index lists references to Merton on 18 of the main text's 140 pages, but it doesn't include all of them.)

While the book's many passages about other people give a sense of the fullness of Quenon's communal life (including a poignant series of entries about the death of his twin sister, Eileen, at 54), the heart of *A Matter of the Heart*, so to speak, is its revelation of the thoughts, questions, convictions and even whimsies that have come to this particular monk in solitude. It's clear from the first few pages that solitude and meditation are where his soul comes most alive. "A difficulty for me in meditation," he writes, "is not so much getting into it as getting out of it – making a transition from interior to exterior realities, with their many impositions and noises" (12). That interior reality includes the beauty he sees again and again in the world around him – a beauty he feels it incumbent upon him to experience fully "as if all persons were seeing it in me" (43). After observing an owl and a killdeer on a warm morning, seeing the light "embedded between folds of smooth somber gray," and feeling a welcome humidity that makes the air "almost tactile," he writes: "The fact that it is mine alone to present and to receive this experience makes

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1. Paul Quenon, OCSO, *In Praise of the Useless Life: A Monk's Memoir* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2018).

it all the more important not to let it slip by unnoticed. If it is lost to me, it is lost to the universe as a human sensation. I am grateful to be here to live this moment of life in the way I alone can" (43).

In this passage and many others, Quenon elucidates the usefulness of the monk's seemingly useless life. Monastic life, he writes, is not proof of God but witness, "which is quite another thing. Witness does not take God as a settled matter. It operates by a different power, not by reason but by love. It operates like the force of gravity which draws one down to a level deeper than questions about the yes or no of God. It is life itself shaping and growing into a sign of transcendence" (37). Bearing witness at this deeper level, Quenon speculates about connection to beings on distant planets through the practice of prayer, reminds himself that our problems are not as bad as those elsewhere ("We don't know what hells exist out there" [61]), and comes to important conclusions about how to live in solitude and community. In one entry, for example, he writes these words we need to hear and remember in today's world: "Fear without compassion makes the heart close, while the open-heart practices hospitality. A welcoming heart is the natural human condition. The door shuts. We are trapped inside with our fear. Fear makes a poor housemate; it cannot be sent away unless the door is opened" (107).

Michael N. McGregor

STEEM, Matthew and Wayne Northey, eds., *The Scholar-Gipsy: Throwness, Memoricide & The Great Tradition: Liber Amicorum for Ron S. Dart*, 2 vols. (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2023), pp. 701 (vol.1). ISBN 979-8-3204-2651-8 (paper) \$18.31; pp. 399 (vol. 2). ISBN 979-8-3204-1296-2 (paper) \$14.62.

Ron Dart is a scholar of remarkable breadth. Over the course of more than three decades of teaching political science, philosophy and religious studies at the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, he has produced a body of work that defies narrow academic classification. Best known for his writings on Thomas Merton and on the Canadian philosopher George Grant – two thinkers who profoundly shaped his own intellectual outlook – Dart has also written on figures as diverse as C. S. Lewis, Stephen Leacock, Erasmus, T. S. Eliot, Herman Hesse, Allen Ginsburg, Jordan Peterson and Evelyn Underhill. His scholarship is marked by a deep concern for the *vita contemplativa* as a necessary counterbalance to the frenetic *vita activa* that defines much of modern life.

Dart's concern for the *vita contemplativa* finds some of its fullest expression in his long engagement with Merton. A co-founder of the