

## ANAMNESIS

Review of

**THOMAS MERTON: FIRST AND LAST MEMORIES**

by Brother Patrick Hart

Bardstow: Necessity Press, 1986

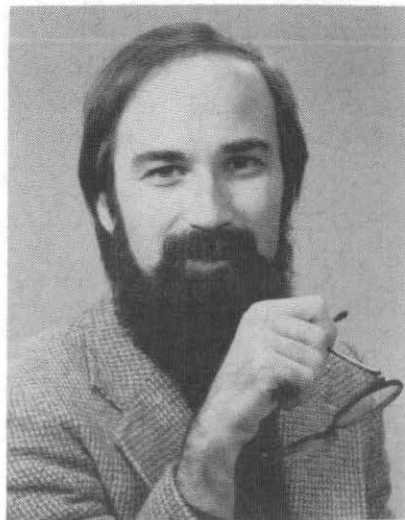
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--Reviewed by **Karl A. Plank**

Memory gives rise to presence. A curator of lived moments, memory gathers scattered fragments of experience and bids them abide within the story of their happening. Recollection seeks narrative and therein imparts to remembered bits and pieces a new power and wholeness. Following its own course, time's passing would weaken our tie to the precious instants of former days; freighted encounters, once vital and immediate, grow dull and lose their living relation to each other and to those selves who had been arrested by the wonder of meeting. This threat memory combats, not by restoring a lost time, but by piecing from its scraps a present story within which the past continues to claim us. What time denies, the remembered story enables: an enduring link to our personal history, the presence of time past.

The past does not become present in its entirety. Memory selects. We remember not the sum of our lives, but those portions which identify us: the moments of profundity and simplicity, emptiness and fullness, within which we have glimpsed some aspect of who we are. Whether they recall the novelty of an extraordinary event, or an unsought-for grace in the rhythm of daily life, these memories furnish the fabric of our self-understanding. They claim us with fear and promise; but it is we who claim them in the stories we tell. The choice to narrate is a choice to affirm, to host the presence of memory.

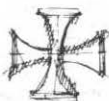
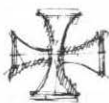
From the blur of stuck-together days, first and last memories protrude as spurs of unusual clarity. Unburdened by worn expectation a first encounter refreshes with the prospect of newness or challenges with the uncertainty of meetings as yet undisclosed. Beginnings interrupt our tedious routine and invite recollection when their time has past, for to remember a beginning is to begin again and to know the presence of promise. So, too, do last encounters loom large in our memory. We approach them with a trusting ease of the familiar, but unknowingly all the same. Only another day can attest the finality of a last meeting and on that day we look back with a deeper awareness of



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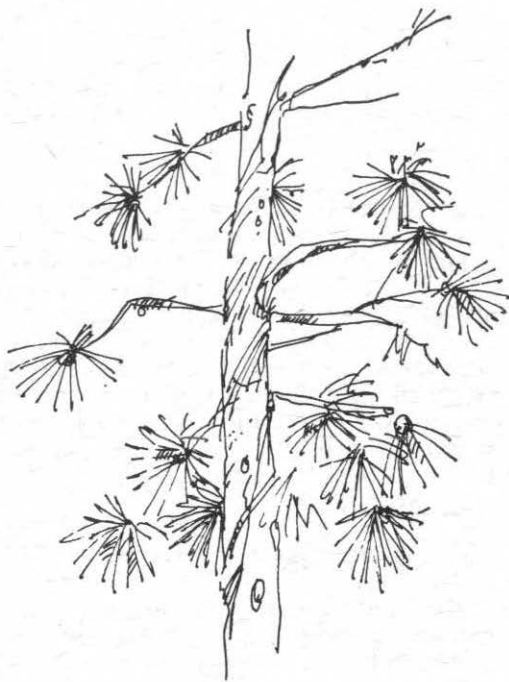
preciousness. The last memory yields the presence of love.



*Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* testifies to the presence of memory as, within its pages, Brother Patrick Hart tells the story of a novice's early venture with Merton and of their final meeting some seventeen years later. Simple and direct, Brother Patrick's recollections provide an uncluttered glimpse, not of Merton himself as much as of a world he shared at these brief moments in time. A spring day and muddy earth witness Merton and a half dozen choir novices making pilgrimage to the woods to plant loblolly pine seedlings. A cool September morning in 1968 finds Merton sharing the Hermitage dawn with three who have come to bless his journey, only to be blessed in return.

Memoir is not biography. *First and Last Memories* does not intend to satisfy a reader's fascination with the life of Merton, but to affirm a life remembered. As a celebrant of that life, Brother Patrick protects its silences, trusting what comes to expression in his memories to speak sufficiently for itself. This it does with plain eloquence, and more. These glimpses, cherished in their own right, do not point finally to Merton, but to the gracious realities he embodied and made available to others. Here we find, as in a sacrament, the discovery of the holy in ordinary things: the promise of loblolly pines, the precious goodness of eating together, and the nurturing love of friendship caught in the intimacy of snapshots and the exchange of farewells. *First and Last Memories* remembers Thomas Merton but, throughout, it gives presence to the nearness of God in a human life.

Such memories must be preserved with care. Where expressed, they deserve the integrity of craftsmanship that protects against their trivialization or easy commerce. The purity of Brother Patrick's prose, the apt illustrations by Jim Cantrell, and the true, hand-crafted production of Bardstown's Necessity Press (operated by Jeanette Cantrell) combine to mark *Thomas Merton: First and Last Memories* as a worthy bearer of presence. In the richness of its simplicity, this volume stands as an icon of the realities narrated on its pages. Wherever grace freights our common world, may we respond with gratitude.



**LOBLOLLY PINE**

Drawing by **Jim Cantrell**