

# MERTON IN APPARITION

Review of

*FATHER LOUIE:*

*PHOTOGRAPHS OF THOMAS MERTON*

BY RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD

Edited with a preface by Barry Magid <sup>1</sup>

New York: Timken Publishers, 1991

107 pages — 52 plates /

\$19.95 paperback — \$40.00 cloth

\$200.00 deluxe — \$5,000.00 portfolio

*RALPH EUGENE MEATYARD:*

*AN AMERICAN VISIONARY*

Edited by Barbara Tannenbaum <sup>2</sup>

New York: Rizzoli International Publications

for the Akron Art Museum, 1991

207 pages — 87 plates / \$25.00 paperback

Reviewed by **Brother Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.**

## 1.

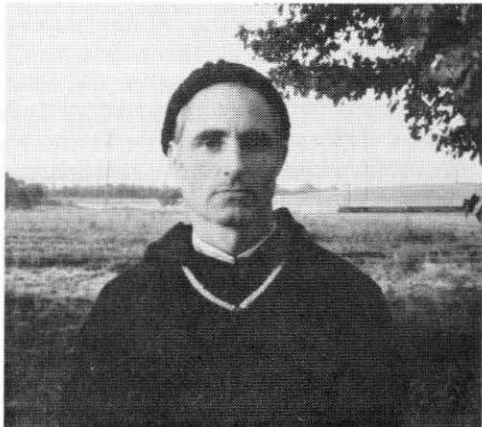
It may be an exaggeration to say that Thomas Merton has been photographed as much as the Pope, as does Guy Davenport as an aside in his introductory essay, but it is not *much* of an exaggeration. And it is certainly an anomaly, given the fact that publication of the recognizable features of a monk was forbidden by Statutes of the Cistercian Order. At least they were when *Sign* magazine presented the first public apparition of the Merton monk-mug by John Howard

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□ **Brother Paul Quenon, O.C.S.O.**, is a monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani at Trappist, Kentucky. He is a photographer and has compiled a slide show introduction to the Abbey. A collection of his photographs was exhibited at Bellarmine College last year and one of his images hangs in the Thomas Merton Studies Center. He has reviewed Merton books and articles in *Cistercian Studies*, *The Lexington Herald-Leader*, and *The Merton Seasonal*. His essay, "Shadows at the Redwoods: Merton Remembered," appeared in *The Merton Annual* 2 (1989).

1. Includes "Tom & Gene," by Guy Davenport; "Photographing Thomas Merton: A Reminiscence," by Ralph Eugene Meatyard; "A Eulogy of Thomas Merton," by Ralph Eugene Meatyard; "Correspondence," between Thomas Merton and Ralph Eugene Meatyard; and "A Note," by Christopher Meatyard.

2. Includes "Foreword," by Michael D. Kahan; "Fiction as a Higher Truth," by Barbara Tannenbaum; "Seeing the Unseen, Saying the Unsayable," by David L. Jacobs; "Ralph Eugene Meatyard," by Van Deren Coke; and "Remembering Gene Meatyard," by Wendell Berry.



**BROTHER PAUL QUENON**

Griffin. Shortly after that the Statute was changed, and in 1966 an extended photo essay by Ed Rice appeared in *Jubilee*. Previous to that no book cover or jacket flap gave Merton's readers a clue as to what he looked like, and they were left to devise an image of their own.

Most photographs ever taken look like the real Merton, but no two photographers seem to capture the same Merton. On the other hand, most paintings and sculptures do not look like the real Merton, and capture little of his spirit. Why there should be an affinity for the camera and not other media is hard to explain. His was not a face you would expect to be photogenic, but it was really quite inexhaustible. I remember snapshots from the late fifties where Fr. Louis looks like a dowdy English don, shots from the mid-sixties where he looks like your friendly garbage man, and late pictures where he's the jovial manager of a bowling alley. It is common to hear how Merton looks like a cross between Pablo Picasso, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet. Protean man in apparitions, yet always recognizably true to himself.

The Merton Ralph Eugene Meatyard captures is equally inexhaustible. His strongest affinity is with Merton the literary sophisticate, a projection we did not see around the halls of the monastery — the everyday Merton did not stand out much. Meatyard fortunately also captures that more anonymous, monastic Merton precisely in those pictures, strange to say, that are posed. Posed, unposed, over-posed, the chemistry of artist and subject is as curious a mix as in any dark room. Darkness is typical of Meatyard's style to begin with, and it is used to effect in presenting the apophatic Merton in bold silhouette.

Each encounter of artist and subject produces its own concoction. Merton-as-he-must-have-felt-after-a-few-drinks is found in double focus in a picnic series. Elsewhere, the blurred, soft focus images of Wendell Berry, Denise Levertov and Merton make of them a memory against the sharp wintry background of the hermitage, a passing event in literary history, while the place itself remains. The picture is more relevant now than it was when it was taken for one can still detect a lingering scent of creativity at the hermitage today. Commentaries by Meatyard's son, Christopher, about this sequence are so "hermetic" that one wonders if Gene really meant to be so symbolic. The fact that the pictures often are symbolic might be part of their own autonomous chemistry.

Portrait photography reflects the visage behind the camera as often as the one in front. Much depends on the method used. It seems to have been Ed Rice's practice to annoy his subjects until they were feeling quite vulnerable (his portraits of Jacques Maritain are a case in point), and then snap the shutter. Something of the irate comes through in his portrait of Merton on the hill in front of the monastery, most currently used on the cover of David Cooper's *Merton's Art of Denial*, and on the reverse cover of *A Vow of Conversation* where it is wrongly attributed to Griffin. Meatyard's method was to make himself inconspicuous while photographing, and shoot at random moments. The results were probably a surprise to him, as much an autonomous creation of the camera as a creation of his own. At other times everything seems to be under careful control, and to have been seen in detail ahead of time. In these form takes precedence over personality for his subject.

With all due credit to the variety of styles displayed here, one might wonder if the book might not have been improved by having fewer photographs. Showing the same thing in the same way does not get sufficient redemption from the fact that it is Merton who is concerned.

## 2.

The feature essay by Guy Davenport, “Tom and Gene,” recounts a series of personal meetings and visits with Merton, whom he first visited with Meatyard and the poet, Jonathan Williams, during Epiphany season. He is puzzled that they were dubbed “three kings from Lexington” in a letter to Robert Lax, an elusive bit of liturgical ghetto-humor for monastic types. Davenport gives us some really precious vignettes, especially ones where Fr. Louis was being anything but “precious,” and captures his mood when he was around *literati* and artists, e.g., in a discussion of the affair of Bishop Pike who had abandoned his car in a desert: “All bishops are mad!” Or in his impersonation of Heraclitus savaging Martin Heidegger: “Heidegger understood nothing of Being.” Thanks to Guy Davenport’s kind of empathy the dour and devout may be alerted that “The Ace” in *Cables to the Ace* might be a name for God. Small wonder that after his death one among this circle of friends imagined how Fr. Louis arrived in heaven, held out his hand to God, and hooted: “Hello, you old son of a bitch!”

A very vivid portrait of Eugene Meatyard also emerges from this study. Davenport sees him as “a lapsed Methodist,” “an existentialist,” who “had made a kind of surreal poetry of the visual.” He is intrigued by the interaction of the two men and is impressed by the “wild diversity” of these portraits. One of the salient points Davenport makes is how these plates are simply another reinterpretation of a man who both energizes us and eludes us.

Consider the mythic charisma Lincoln’s photographs have contributed to our sense of him. We are all healthily aware that photographs lie, deceive, and misrepresent, and yet we go right on reading them as if they were expert witnesses. Richard Nixon’s unfortunate face seems to spell out his lack of character, his villainy, his deviousness. “The body,” said Wittgenstein, “is a picture of the soul.”  
(page 33)

I remember Fr. Louis once saying “a picture in the eye of eternity,” after we were photographed with a blurry little polaroid. I was puzzled by what he meant, but today I can see him looking out at me through that image, seen not so much as seeing. One of the most poignant moments of the essay is at the end when Davenport recounts:

Gene called me one Sunday morning to say he’d had a dream about Tom. He was getting off an old-fashioned electric trolley in some Eastern city (turbans, robes) and its trolley pole had fallen and hurt him. A few days later Gene called to say he’d heard of Tom’s death by electrocution in Bangkok.

It may seem petty, in the face of such a lively rendition of the spirit of the man, to complain about some factual errors — here and in other essays in the collection. But for the sake of keeping the record straight these are some points. Merton was *not* in the hermitage twenty-seven years (page 35), but only three years. General Electric was never considered a benefactor for the Hermitage. The Ford Foundation was the possibility considered, but no application was ever made. The designer of the model was, incidentally, an employee of General Electric. Tommie O’Callaghan never asked to see the corpse of Merton on its return (page 35) and it was never shown to her. Signs excluding women (page 24) were not found on the approach to the Abbey, but only near the immediate entrances to the enclosure — ominous as they were even there. A point of interest: the goat cheese (page 25) served at the hermitage was specially made for Fr. Louis since he was allergic to cow’s milk. It was not standard diet for the community.

A comprehensive review of the marvelous extent and variety of the photography of Ralph Eugene Meatyard is now available as a catalogue of an exhibition tour that began in September in San Francisco and ends in Akron, Ohio, in August of 1993. Meatyard designated himself as “a dedicated amateur,” and one has to be impressed by his dedication, by his openness to new experiments and methods. This ranges from formal abstractions to bizarre fiction to the droll fantasies of Lucybelle Crater who replicates herself everywhere in endless embodiments.

Because darkness is the preferred tone of his photographs, Meatyard has not always been served well by printers. This volume gives fair treatment to shadow areas, as does *Father Louie*. Both are satisfying printings of an admittedly difficult style.

Meatyard’s interest in Zen predated his encounter with Merton, and came by his own reading and isolated studies. It is easily recognized by his spare Zen twigs, but also stands as “an educated background,” he says, “to all my photographs.” Many of Meatyard’s photographs, perhaps even those least Oriental in style, can be considered as *koans*. As Barbara Tannenbaum says in her thorough introduction, these are “deliberately paradoxical questions or riddles used to free the mind from logic on the path to enlightenment.” She describes the classic Zen material in Meatyard by collating two passages from Merton’s *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*: “curious anecdotes, strange happenings, cryptic declarations, explosions of illogical humor, not to mention contradictions, inconsistencies, eccentric and even absurd behavior” — a passage Merton wrote as a preface to John Wu’s *The Golden Age of Zen* — and a description of Zen practice as “aimed at blasting the foundation of ready explanation and comforting symbol out from under the disciple’s supposed ‘experience’.” One might add that even the moribund and fictional plates are Buddhist reminders that all is changing, all is illusion. Small wonder that Merton, in his journal after meeting Meatyard, expresses his affinity for these photographs: “marvelous arresting visionary things. Most haunting and suggestive, mythical, photography I ever saw” (*Restricted Journals*, 18 January 1967).

In the short appreciation by Van Deren Coke, this affinity is seen as mutual: “Many of his pictures were intended to evoke meditation and a mood of withdrawal. Perhaps this was why he was drawn to Merton and was such an admirer of Ezra Pound’s poetry. Their views of life, while quite different, were attuned to life’s mysteries. . . . He created dreamstates that were intended to promote contemplation. His pictures are closer to disquieting reveries than nightmares.”

The introduction by Barbara Tannenbaum outlines the course of Meatyard’s artistic development, and discusses it fully. The essay by her co-curator, David L. Jacobs, amplifies the artistic treatment of Meatyard’s work. Together these essays give us a rich and satisfying fill of this amazing, creative Kentuckian who spent most of his time as family man and businessman. The volume affords us an appreciation of the real stature of this artist who died in 1972, but who only now is exercising his strongest influence among young photographers.