

The Light Shines in the Darkness

Review of

A Mind Awake in the Dark:

Papers from the 2000 Oakham Conference

of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Edited by Paul M. Pearson, Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson

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Reviewed by **Jane Marie Richardson, SL**

What a pleasure as well as a personal stimulus to read these papers from the 2000 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland. These excellent studies – eighteen of them – remind us once again of how deeply and powerfully God’s grace worked in the life of Thomas Merton and how deeply indebted to him so many of us are. As I read through the pages of this book, I often had to pause and thank God not only for the gift of Merton but also for the gift of those who presented so well these nourishing insights and reflections about him at the Oakham Conference. Taken both individually and as a whole, these essays help us to deepen and expand our knowledge and understanding of Merton, and, in so doing, help us to grow in our own self-understanding and commitment to love and truth.

The presidential address of Canon A. M. Allchin on “Merton and Traherne: The Two Thomases” (9-15) immediately puts us in touch with something of the best in Merton’s own Anglican heritage. While Traherne (1637-1674) lived and died centuries before Merton, he did write religious material, both prose and poetry, that influenced many of his time as well as later. It is this affinity that Canon Allchin remarks upon and develops in his introduction to the conference.

Lawrence Cunningham, in his address to the conference, takes up the theme of “Thomas Merton and the Stranger” (17-27), the stranger, of course, being Merton himself as he adjusts to his new life in the hermitage. Merton had an early image of himself as a hermit, but even so, the reality proved different in some respects from his notions about it. In an essay written about this time, he reflects: “In an age where there is much talk about ‘being yourself,’ I reserve to myself the right to forget about being myself, since in any case there is very little chance of my being anybody else.” And he adds, “It is a compelling necessity for me to be free to embrace the necessity of my own nature.” Christine Bochen in her presentation “Radiant Darkness: The Dawning into Reality” (28-42), points out that “Merton invites us to recognize the stranger beside us and the stranger within us. He teaches us how to live in our world.”

Subsequent presentations are similarly rich and informative, with such topics as The Poetry of Thomas Merton, Merton and the East, Merton and Monasticism, Merton and the Heart, Merton and the Mystics. There is no way to summarize adequately these excellent studies – each is so carefully crafted and engaging. But perhaps a few words about each section will lead the reader to seek more of this “awakening.”

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The section on Merton's poetry (62-92) includes studies of individual poems by David Scott, Michael Woodward, Patrick O'Brien (whose homily also concludes the volume), Christine Bochen and Paul Pearson. It begins with his experience at the Basilica of St. Praxedes, one of the earliest – and loveliest – churches of Rome. Merton was deeply moved by his visit there in 1933. Later, his friend Raissa Maritain tried to capture something of its beauty and meaning in the poem "Mosaic: St. Praxed's," which he translated. If one is to know Merton well, it is essential to become acquainted with his poetry, to read it, study it, speak it aloud, savor it, let it resonate in the heart. So much of Merton's spirit, as well as his creativity, is in his poems. The selections offered here are among some of his better known pieces, and rightly so. Merton's lament for his brother, lost in World War II, is especially remarkable, poignant beyond description, matched only, perhaps, by his other great lament: "If only you and I / Were possible." Merton's large body of poetry is an indispensable part of his legacy and self-definition.

Monika-Clare Ghosh, an Irish hermit, writes about the night as "our ministry" (117-29), referring to those who, like herself and the monks and others, pray during the darkness before morning light. Recognizing that such a practice is shared by many traditions, Monika refers to it as "leaving a kind of bookmark in one's mind overnight, so that it falls open at adoration," surely an apt and gracious image. She quotes Merton, writing about night's mystery and authority: "One can pretend in the solitude of an afternoon walk, but the night destroys all pretences, one is reduced to nothing." Night enlightens the heart.

In a refreshing phrase, "A City Is Something You Do . . ." (130-40), Gary Hall, a Methodist minister, suggests that, for Merton, a city is not "something you do with space" but rather something that *others* do and one enters into it as one can. Hall points out that Merton actually knew little about cities and perhaps judged them inadequately. But Merton did speak about street violence in a rather positive way when he wrote: "It [violence] is a way of reminding business, the city, the fuzz, etc. that you are there, that you are tired of being a non-person, that you are not just a passive machine for secreting indefinite amounts of submission." Merton's sense of justice is strongly echoed in this passage. In looking down the road he does have hope: "This time . . . it will be the infinite value of human identity flaming up in a heart that is confident in loving. This is the beginning of power. This is the beginning of transformation."

In "The Portable Cloister of the Heart: Emerging New Forms of the Monastic Impulse" (141-48), Rich Fournier offers an image of the human heart itself as a "portable" cloister, as the place where one always has the possibility of communing with God. Cultivation of this awareness of God's presence is nourished through relationships with other people, with fellow travelers and spiritual mentors. Stability thus becomes fidelity to chosen values of the heart, to the "monastic impulse" understood as living for God. It is a movement in one's life from artifice to personal freedom and the ability to create and maintain a home for communion with God. Fournier encourages our finding a place within where we can "hear" or perceive God calling us "from artifice to authenticity," and reminds us once again of the primacy of being over doing and having.

What interests David Henderson in his essay, "Self-Experience in Thomas Merton and C. G. Jung: Apophatic and Kataphatic Traditions in the Twentieth Century" (149-55), he tells us, is that both Jung and Merton addressed "in a self-conscious manner, the dilemmas of modern man and mass man." Merton stressed emptiness and authenticity; Jung, strong affect and imagery. Both place "the experience of the self" at the heart of their search for meaning. Jung refers to his life as "a story of the self-realization of the unconscious." Merton concludes: "When we know love in our own hearts, we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose." Amen!