

Nurturing a Sacramental Awareness

Review of
*Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise:
 Three Essays on Thomas Merton*
 Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset, UK: Thomas Merton Society
 of Great Britain and Ireland, 2006
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Reviewed by **Ellyn Crutcher**

Thomas Merton united with the Divine in nature – seeking and receiving God’s mercy in the sacrament of his keen observation of his surroundings. Each of the three addresses included in this booklet, all of which were presented at Oakham School in April 2006 at the British Merton Society’s Sixth Conference and General Meeting, reinforces the concept of divine spiritual connection by offering layers of experiences forming Merton’s spiritual sedimentary rock. Canon A. M. Allchin’s Foreword ably labels core samples extracted from three essays.

Monica Weis’s essay, “The Birds Ask: ‘Is it Time to Be?’: Thomas Merton’s Moments of Spiritual Awakening” (10-27), draws the reader in with journal references: listening to God in a specially offered bower on New Year’s Day and being guided in his spiritual practice by the example of a hawk performing his well-honed food-capturing skill. Encountered just after the holiday season, as I write this review, Weis’s reference to gifts coming during Ordinary Time is particularly refreshing. In awe and innocence, Merton contemplates the first chirps of waking birds as they inquire “Is it time to be?” and God answers them, “Yes.” *Le point vierge* is palpable as an event, the dawn, but also an indwelling of God’s presence, the divine spark. Hair standing on end, Merton is present in “unspeakable Paradise” (18) as a result of God’s mercy that is all around us. With his “eyes of the soul wide open” (18) Merton moved toward trust in mercy with his observation of the steady, daily unfoldings in the natural world.

Paul Pearson’s essay refers us to Meister Eckhart’s “spark within the soul” (28) – akin to *le point vierge*. Merton was drawn to the core spirit, the logos of art, craft and writing. Pearson’s essay “Beyond the Shadow and the Disguise: Thomas Merton’s Embrace of Logos” (28-43), guides us to the writing of Clement of Alexandria. (Merton had access to the original texts in Gethsemani’s library, notes Pearson.) Clement’s “the Logos our Teacher” speaks of a divine inheritance, “an inheritance that cannot be lost,” resonating again with *le point vierge* – a point or spark which belongs entirely to God. Another pathway enabling Merton to experience the spiritual light is his visit to Pleasant Hill, then an unrestored Shaker village. Merton especially sensed a mystical quality about Shaker barns – “dignity, solidity, permanence” – and Shaker furniture – “in and for heaven.” The Shaker barn “always fits right into its location, manifests the *logos* of the place where it is built.” Likewise, Merton observed that the “*logos of the site*” was important in twelfth-century Cistercian

Ellyn Crutcher lives in Louisville, KY, where she is active in the arts and in community-building, especially using the storytelling medium of film. She is a spiritual director and a graduate of JustFaith, a national, hands-on program integrating personal spirituality and social justice ministry.

monasteries (33). Pearson's essay leads us back to the theme of divine encounter in nature, noting that Merton wrote that the "spirit" of the "running deer" reveals "Something essential, not only in itself, but also in myself . . . Something profound" (35). Pearson concludes with a call to let the logos "Easter in us" (40) and follow God in the "mysterious cosmic dance" (41).

Kathleen Deignan's essay, "Within the Shadow and the Disguise: Thomas Merton's Sacramental Vision" (44-60), invites us to join Thomas Merton, the kataphatic, on the *via affirmativa*: seeing, saying and sensing the Divine. Deignan labels Merton a "sacramentalist from birth" given his artist parents and Welsh ancestry. Merton was tutored in the art of beholding by Owen Merton on many landscape-painting adventures. Natural contemplation, an "intuitive perception of God . . . reflected in . . . creation" (49) led Merton to conclude that all visible things contain a hidden wholeness. At the time of his Baptism, Merton had reflected on how God "speaks to us gently in ten thousand things . . . He shines not on them but from within them" (51-52). Deignan offers examples of Merton sensing "angelic transparency" (52) in stars, creatures, plants. Merton even viewed work tools as sacramental vessels. Besides Merton's contemplation through visual art, he also recognized the lyric poets as masters of natural contemplation. Deignan underscores Merton's affinity for the quest of Celtic monks as they strove to recover paradise by living in the native harmony and unity of all beings. Merton, the forester, experienced the Paradise that was "all around" (54) and via his prayer experience in the presence of the Great Buddhas: "all you do is breathe and look around" (56). Deignan points to Merton's insight that the human soul held the key to protecting the earth from degradation: "we destroy everything because we are destroying ourselves, spiritually, morally, in every way . . . we have numbed and drugged our deepest hungers for communion – with creatures, with the earth – with the artificial stuff of things" (56).

Communion. Wholeness. Logos. Paradise.

Breathe. Look around.

Practice, practice, practice.

It is time to Be.