

Belated Encounters

Review of
On Thomas Merton
 By Mary Gordon
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Reviewed by **Deborah Pope Kehoe**

As a young adult, I was drawn to Mary Gordon's novels with their poetic narrative voice evoking what was to me exotic territory, a mysterious intersection of traditional Roman Catholicism and awakening feminism. Or at least that's how I remember them. Many decades later, with something of a feminist Catholic identity of my own, combined with an enthusiasm for literature and Thomas Merton, I reacted to this book's arrival with a twinge of nostalgia and expectations that if pressed to defend, I would fail. I vaguely fancied an in-depth account of one writer's lifelong spiritual kinship with a venerable elder whom she came to know through his books and with whom she shares an affiliation with the Catholic Church as well as with Columbia University and its environs.

In reality, in the opening pages, Gordon, Barnard College Professor of English, tells how reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a teenager repelled her so much that she developed an "indifference" (2) to Merton's writing that persisted even as she came to view him during the Vietnam years as "a symbol of the best that progressive, politically engaged Catholicism might be" (2). Only when Columbia asked her to give a centenary presentation on Merton and Shambhala then approached her about transforming the lecture into a book, did she resume her reading. Recognizing that she had years' worth of homework to do, she admits her limitations and announces that she will present a highly selective examination of Merton's writing style with the purpose of engaging him "writer to writer" (4).

Gordon's intent to focus on the technical aspects of Merton's writing should be a welcome addition to an underdeveloped area of Merton studies. The book amply demonstrates her superior facility for close textual readings honed throughout a distinguished career as a creative writing teacher, as well as her own proven talents as an award-winning literary stylist. Nevertheless, these strengths are undercut by some significant weaknesses. Much of the book seems to falter under Gordon's acknowledged uncertainty as to "what kind of writer" (7) she has set out to engage, as well as her conspicuous disregard for large portions of his work, despite her attempts

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to explain it away. For the seasoned reader of Merton, these complications ultimately reduce the value of *On Thomas Merton* as a resource on the literary aspects of his work.

This trim volume contains four chapters. In Chapter 1, “Writer to Writer: But What Kind?” (1-39), Gordon specifies the scope of her study. Indeed, aiming to scrutinize the stylistic features of an oeuvre as hefty as Merton’s requires selectivity; however, her curating is worrisome in its categorical nature. For example, she says that she will be discussing none of Merton’s poetry because “he’s not as great a poet as I wish he was” (6). Although critical distaste for Merton’s poetics does not, on its face, warrant protest, Gordon’s follow-up explanation troubles more than it clarifies. She lists contemporary poets to whom Merton “in no way measures up” (6), concludes the list by commenting that she “can’t help wishing that he had learned from [Denise Levertov’s] complex, highly realized poems, which masterfully treat the spiritual and the political” (6), but does not mention any of Merton’s own politically and spiritually charged poems of the 1960s, if only to point out their flaws in contrast with the virtues of Levertov’s. One has to wonder, in prepping for her book on Merton the writer, how deeply into his one-thousand-plus pages of *Collected Poems* did she read?

Similarly, Gordon declines to discuss Merton’s literary criticism, summarily labeling it “unremarkable” (6). Again, she props up her verdict with mystifying logic: “I find it odd that novels are the most frequent topic of his criticism, despite the fact that he never wrote a conventional novel” (6). A curious rationale, in that the Table of Contents of *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* displays the wide range of Merton’s critical interests including poetry, philosophy, drama, and, yes, novels, but hardly only the conventional kind – Faulkner’s, for example.

Again, the issue is with the author’s puzzling justification for another wholesale shunning. Had Gordon given more attention to the criticism, she might have gained insight into how Merton could write about works in genres that he himself did not master: rather than confining his focus to elements of form and style, he explores literary art through a contemplative lens. A close reading of the critical essays could settle more conclusively the matter of what kind of writer she is dealing with and concretely validate her original sense that separating the man of letters from the man of prayer is “impossible” (7).

In Chapter 2 (41-61), Gordon applies her expertise to Merton’s famous autobiography, which made the cut because of its phenomenal popularity and because it “presents us with the best and worst of Thomas Merton as a writer” (42). Having singled out “his power of close observation” and “love of language” (42-43) as Merton’s finest gifts and his “pious, closed, almost inhuman voice” (42) as his cardinal fault, she illustrates by interweaving generous quotation with surgical dissection and forthright responses.

Gordon points out how *The Seven Storey Mountain* illustrates the conventional conversion narrative in which the speaker starkly contrasts his new life with his previous one (50); she then parallels that approach by moving back and forth between passages she admires and those she contemns. She comments on both: complimenting Merton’s skill for rendering scenes in a manner “demotic but precise; fully realized sensually” (56) and lamenting his “esoteric inside baseball” (44) religious jargon, sure, in her view, to bewilder the “common reader” (44), who,

she muses, must have run past “the nasty bits” (50). Possibly projecting her own first experience with *The Seven Storey Mountain* onto scores of unknowable readers, she overstates her personal disdain, a lapse in an otherwise cogent analysis.

It makes sense that in her third chapter (63-85), Gordon, an acclaimed novelist, would choose to examine *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal*, Merton’s only available novel (written in 1941, published posthumously in 1969). Asserting that the novel as form showcases Merton’s talent for sensory description, she laments the loss of his other early efforts in the genre. Again, however, her overall assessment is mixed, and her appraisals again resonate with her preference for elements that do not convey what she reads as his “almost aggressive” Catholic identity, those moments in his writing when Merton “slips into the late Victorian bog that will pollute so much of the autobiography” (79).

She also inveighs against the macaronic characteristics of the book, calling them annoying “blemishes” (66) and comparing them to the “failed experiment” of Esperanto (65), before abruptly transitioning to an extensive quotation from a review by John Leonard, a beloved *New York Times* critic whose positive review of her own first novel launched her career. Unlike Gordon, Leonard extols the novel’s innovative linguistic features, approval that goes unanswered by Gordon, its seeming function here not to provide a basis for further commentary, but to share a delightful coincidence that enhances an “eerie feeling of connectedness” (66) with Merton. Like the previous chapter, chapter 3 provides plenty of vivid illustrations of Gordon’s writer-to-writer engagement of Merton, but it also suggests her reluctance to delve beneath the surface of his complex vocation.

At moments throughout the book, the author’s emotions tend to walk in on her analytical skills. Nowhere does this happen more dramatically than in the final chapter (87-133), which surveys the seven volumes of Merton’s diaries. Having professed earlier that she “fell in love” (4) with Merton by reading his journals, she launches this largest section of her book by personally regretting that it took her so long to open them. Reading them, she says, was like “having another life” (87). This is the most rewarding chapter of the book; the only sustained foray into post-1940s Merton, it leads Gordon to a more integrated vision of him as writer and monk and a perceptible appreciation for his merging of “the aesthetic and the spiritual” (98) in his writing.

She once again highlights Merton’s talents for concrete description and extols his use of imagist tropes with metaphysical effects, citing the striking simile in his April 28, 1964 entry: “a tanager singing like a drop of blood in the tall thin pines” (90). Additionally, she observes with pleasure the tonal variations of his voice and calls his inconsistencies his most “lovable” and “approachable” (127) qualities.

Finally, in contrast to her experiences of his earlier works with their irksome notes of triumphalist Catholicism, Gordon now views the overtly religious discourse in his journals without carping, recognizing them, particularly those from the pen of a more mature Merton, as emanations from the “one constant in his life . . . his intense and passionate relationship with God” (127). She pronounces it “beautiful writing” that reveals his “attempt to express [the] inexpressible” (127) and like “the paintings of Mark Rothko” (127), not a subject for analysis.

Having closed Merton’s journals in tears, Gordon concludes her study with only a

brief wrap-up. This unceremonious departure gives the impression that this project with its unassuming title *On Thomas Merton* is the result of a temporary fascination that ran its course – but not without leading the author to some gratifying discoveries about a writer she had left on the shelf for too many years.