

A Testament of Insight and Empathy

Review of

The Ground of Love and Truth:

Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman Known as "M"

By Suzanne Zuercher, OSB

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Reviewed by **Daniel P. Horan, OFM**

In the decades since Thomas Merton's death in December, 1968, few aspects of his life have captured more interest and speculation (with the possible exception of Merton's death itself) than his relationship with a student nurse who is referred to as "M" in his edited journals. Beyond the casual interest fans of Merton's writing might have had in learning about this previously virtually unknown dimension of his last years, a great deal has been written on the subject in recent years. Much of the attention paid to this relationship has focused on emphasizing that which is seemingly sensational, scandalizing or otherwise salacious about the romantic relationship between a Trappist monk and a woman who was about 25 years younger than he was. And many of the articles, commentaries and books written on the subject have ranged from the disappointing to the absurd, often presenting readers with an overly simplistic, black-and-white interpretation of this chapter in Merton's life. However, Suzanne Zuercher, OSB's new book, *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman Known as "M"* is neither disappointing nor absurd, and the reflections contained within offer readers a more nuanced look at what nevertheless remains a very complex relationship.

Zuercher's book could not have existed without the pioneering work of Christine Bochen, who edited the sixth volume of Merton's published journals, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (1997). It is over the course of those entries from 1966 and 1967 that we learn first-hand of the relationship and journey with Merton along the pilgrimage of self-discovery within the context of his love and life. For those not familiar with what happened, Bochen's excellent introduction to Merton's journals summarizes it well:

Merton left the hermitage to go to the hospital for back surgery on March 23 [1966]. A week later he met M., a student nurse assigned to care for him, and they fell in love. In the weeks and months that followed, as spring turned to summer, they exchanged letters, talked on the phone when Merton was able to call, and spent some time together at Gethsemani and in Louisville. Their visits were few, hours alone fewer still. But, almost from the beginning, their love blossomed and, almost from the beginning, Merton knew that the relationship could not endure. He was, after all, a monk. (*Learning to Love*, xvi)

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Zuercher's book picks up here, accepting the straightforwardness of this chronology and the well-meaning intentions of both Merton and M, and seeks to imagine what the experience might have been like for Merton without unnecessary embellishment or disrespectful speculation. At the core of *The Ground of Love and Truth* are Merton's own words from his journal, from which Zuercher's personal reflections and creative expressions arise.

Admitting the complexity of the relationship between Merton and M from the outset, Zuercher identifies several hesitations in her short introduction that had initially prevented her from writing this book. In addition to the recognition that the relationship was understandably complicated, Zuercher is candid about her self-doubts as a writer and her ability to grapple with the subject matter that this book would require. Another hesitancy Zuercher admits stems from Merton's own acknowledgement of the complexity and mystifying quality of the circumstances in which he and M found themselves. If Merton couldn't quite figure it out, how could she? How could anyone else?

From the pen of some other author, these qualifications might be read as a form of hedging one's chances of a favorable reading or at least as an attempt to establish low expectations. Yet Zuercher exhibits early on an honest and direct quality about her prose. There is no pandering to the would-be historical voyeur nor is there any hint of libel to be found in Zuercher's consideration of Merton's experience. Instead, the introduction sets a welcoming and trust-building tone that carries through the eighteen brief chapters and epilogue that follow.

Whereas other accounts or reflections about Merton's relationship with M might present their experience as one to be avoided, as first and foremost a violation of a monk's vowed commitment to a life without this sort of exclusive affection and concern, Zuercher sees in their short-lived relationship an experience of love that was significant in Merton's development as a human person. She counts herself among those "who believed that his relationship with [M] was important, even essential, for him to become a complete human being" (9). As Zuercher traces the relationship in her reflections on Merton's journal entries, the reader comes to see a sympathetic narrator who empathizes with the struggle that this monk and this nurse experienced while discerning the meaning of their connection and love.

It is refreshing to read a presentation of this important episode in Merton's life through a positive lens. Yet, it must be said that at no time is Zuercher's outlook naïve or Pollyanna-ish. At every step of the way Zuercher acknowledges the tensions, grief, anxieties and pain that such intimate love carries with it, especially under such complicated circumstances. It seems that Zuercher is able to present and then comment on the relationship in this way because she can relate as one who is also a professed religious. She writes: "I feel that I understand what Merton was going through, not only because of what he wrote in his journal but also because of what so many have gone through in their own struggle to understand what it means to love" (10). While being a member of a religious community does not *de facto* enable someone to offer such insight, Zuercher's own life journey strikes me as having undoubtedly influenced her project for the better.

One of the most affirming aspects of Zuercher's book is her sensitive handling of the "other half" of the relationship. Throughout the book, M is mentioned with kindness and often invoked with concern and care. Though Zuercher makes clear that "questions of her real identity and current whereabouts are irrelevant to my purpose here" (8), consideration of how M might have felt or what she might have experienced as Merton struggled with his own understanding of and discernment

about their relationship respectfully arises from time to time. This acknowledgement of the two-way character of a loving relationship lends an additional degree of credibility to Zuercher's presentation.

The structure of her book is simple, with each chapter consisting of three distinct sections. She opens each of the chapters with a poem composed in "the imagined voice of Thomas Merton" (11), followed by a brief excerpt from Merton's journals, and each chapter concludes with a short reflection on the poem and the quotation. The selection of the excerpts from Merton's journals offers the reader a fair glimpse at the highs and lows of Merton's own introspection and discernment about the relationship. The reflections that form the bulk of the book are marked by the careful and balanced approach I have already mentioned above.

The third component of each chapter, the original poem, is perhaps the most daring aspect of Zuercher's book. The world of counterfactual consideration of a historical figure's thoughts is a dangerous territory. Rarely do such efforts to "imagine" what this or that person might say, think or do succeed. If there were any weak point in Zuercher's book, it would have to be the poetry given this elected genre. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that these experimental and creative expressions of what Merton might have felt or thought as Zuercher imagined his experience arising from his journals are not as off-putting as one might think. I do not feel qualified to comment on the quality of the poems from a literary standpoint, but I can say that I came to appreciate the change of tone and style each opening poem brought to the chapters. The threefold format allowed for a welcomed multi-textured feel to the book.

While this book does not offer any new research or previously unknown material, it does present important insights and a much-needed positive glimpse into a complicated relationship that will surely continue to fascinate Merton fans and scholars alike. Sr. Suzanne Zuercher died shortly after this book's publication. It seems to me that she left us a true gift in these reflections, which offers an appropriate capstone to her life's work while indeed honoring the memory of Merton and M's relationship.