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Book Reviews


Thomas Merton's life was a work of art. It contained all the conditions of the aesthetic: conservation, tension, cumulation, anticipation and fulfillment. Ross Labrie's book concerns Merton the artist. It is a literary introduction to his writings, designed to show Merton's versatility in various literary forms—novel, diary, essay and poem. Labrie appropriately sets Merton's writings in the context of his life, and illuminates his principal themes, methods, and influences. The work is a striking success in skillfully organizing a huge amount of material (some 50 books and 300 articles), and presenting it with clarity, precision, and accuracy.

The opening chapter sensitively captures the deep ambivalence and inner struggle between the contemplative and artistic in Merton himself. Was he not betraying his solitary vocation in devoting his energies to the production of social materials? Intellectually, the problem remained insoluble for him. He lived himself into the solution. Labrie notes that Merton's urge to write was closely linked with his sense of his own identity. He had to. It was his way of creating a living identity and connecting with those beyond his monastic cell. His artistic work acquired the purity of religious contemplation. It was driven by a prophetic impulse and sustained by a religious ideal. Merton assumed that the true artist had to be religious.

As a writer, Merton trusted the intuitive and initial inspiration. He crossed over easily and instinctively into various literary forms. Labrie neatly divides the body of his book into chapters assessing Merton as narrative writer, diarist, essayist and poet. Merton may not be remembered as a major literary figure but, undoubtedly, he has left a body of memorable writings. After initial disappointments with the narrative form, Merton produced The Seven Storey Mountain. Immediately acclaimed as a spiritual classic, it was recognized as one of the finest autobiographies in this century. Narratives tell the story of Merton's interior drama: haunted by the problem of identity and the hound of heaven. He did not pursue this form after the 1940s.

In his diaries, Labrie claims, Merton may have left some of the richest, incisive, and spontaneous self-conscious literary gems. They are fresh, candid, immediate, and vulnerable. The Sign of Jonas and Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander portray the shaping of a man's religious consciousness, the attention to ordinary routine, the freshness of the natural world, and the gnawing alienation in contemporary culture. They are eloquent and rich in imagery.

The essay eventually became Merton's major vehicle of social commentary. He experienced a profound transformation in outlook during the 1960s. He evolved from an enclosed traditional awareness to an impassioned prophetic figure. The essay was his public voice for justice and against mindless technology. They are engaging, lucid, and full of paradox.
He chose the tentative over the absolute, conscience over conformity, and Faulkner and Camus could be as profound and prophetic as a Kung or a ton mauuscripts. Its contribution, while not particularly original, is renewal over the routine. His artistic life was a constant contest with censorship. His ultimate concern, however, was to maintain the church in truth. an explorer—given not to religious propaganda but to passion and paradoxes.

Ross Labrie's book is a valuable addition to the mounting number of Merton manuscripts. Its contribution, while not particularly original, is refreshing and well researched. It lures us into the world of Thomas Merton, where we are captivated by the magnetism of the man. St. Bonaventure University

Kieran Scott


The title of this book, Geography of Holiness, perhaps constitutes an attempt by the editor, Deba Patnaik, to impose a meaning on Merton's photography that does not necessarily correspond to Merton's vision of what he saw in the world of reality. No theological or contemplative pattern seems to emerge; what we have instead is a collection of pictures put together with taste and discernment, based on what the editor believed Father Louis (Merton) tried to capture with his camera. This may not be fair to Merton, for not only are editorial liberties taken with the arrangement of the photographs, but, as the Acknowledgements page appears to suggest, some of the technical aspects of the publication and preparation of the photographs were done by others. Thus there is a certain sense of intrusiveness about the editor's hand.

Merton might well have chosen different photographs, different captions from Merton's work, etc., and an infinite chain of such editors could never hope to fathom Merton's intent. Still, despite this cavil, the work is done with great taste and appreciation for the man; the task of communication is always a difficult one, and the speculator, as Marcel Duchamps noted in 1957, must also be brought into the tator, as Marcel Duchamps noted in 1957, must also be brought into the creative work before it can take its proper place in the real world. The efforts of Deba Patnaik will certainly bring joy and happiness to the many devoted followers of Thomas Merton, as they contemplate the many ideas Merton attempted to bring into reality with his camera. Perhaps this quotation from Merton's New Seeds of Contemplation, which Patnaik reproduces as a caption, best expresses the contribution of this collection to Merton studies:

If you ever receive a letter, said Thomas Merton as a young Trappist, "or see a document signed by someone who puts the letters OCSO after his name (Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance) you can tell yourself he is someone who has found out the meaning of life." (p. 139).

St. Bonaventure University

Cornelius Welch, O.F.M.