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Book Reviews

The Art of Thomas Merton. By Ross Labrie. Fort Worth, Texas: The Texas Christian University Press, 1979. Pp. xiii, 188. $11.00.

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 Mertou'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 inspiratiou. He crossed over easily and instinctively iuto 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 o Guilty Bystander* portray the shaping of a man's religious consciousuess, 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.

In the final years of his life, Merton became more at home with the poetic. He resisted a stifling academic style and searched for a new form. Poetry became the medium for his creative ideas and his principal arena for experimenting with language. The poet and the contemplative became one in him as he moved toward death.

In light of my own particular interests, the book helped surface and keep simmering three current concerns: religious identity, religious language, and religious censorship.

1. Merton's life and work is a paradigmatic demonstration of the quest for religious identity in the context of religious diversity. He held the particular and the universal in tension. His story and stories epitomize the breakdown of parochialism and the breakthrough to a new public consciousness. He is a symbol and synthesis of contemporary Catholicism.

2. Merton's work points the way towards an alternative form of religious writing and language. He indicts twentieth-century theology and philosophy for being buried alive in academic abstractions and cut off from the fertile mainstream of Western symbolism. Religious writing, he felt, should be grounded in the natural world, nurtured in the crucible of human experience and expressed in the living form of creative writing and literary criticism. Faulkner and Camus could be as profound and prophetic as a Küng or a Rahner. His shift from theological texts to literary models opens the way for the cultivation of a new religious imagiuation.

3. Merton had an instinctive distrust of a monolithic Catholicism. He was an explorer—given not to religious propaganda but to passion and paradoxes. He chose the tentative over the absolute, couscience over conformity, and renewal over the routine. His artistic life was a constant contest with censorship. His ultimate concern, however, was to maintain the church in truth. He remained faithful—but *criticolly* affirmative. Would he have survived today?

Ross Labrie's book is a valuable addition to the mounting number of Merton mauuscripts. 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.

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Kieran Scott

Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton. By Deba Prasad Patnaik, Ed. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1980. Photographs—100; Captions—selected, interleaved; Foreword, Afterword, Introduction, Chronology. $17.50.

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 Acknowledgments 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 intrnsiveness about the editor's hand that may bar some readers from a full appreciation of Merton's photographic art, and a certain confusion about the book's actual purpose. Another editor 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 spectator, as Marcel Duchamps noted in 1957, must also be bronght iuto 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 briug 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:

> But there is a higher light still, not the light by which man "gives names" and forms concepts, with the aid of the active intelligence, bnt the dark light in which no names are given, in which God confronts man not through medinm of things, but in His own simplicity. The union of the simple light of God with the simple light of man's spirit, in love, is contemplation.

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Cornelius Welch, O.F.M.

Merton: A Biography. By Monica Furlong. New York: Harper & Row. Pp. xx, 342. $12.95.

"If yon 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).

Oh dear.

Some mixture of idealism, naivéte, tendeutiousness, loveable openness, sense of otherness and possibly a degree of deliberate provocation lies behind this embarrassing manifesto, which troubles the reader of Merton's life (it certainly troubled and embarrassed its author, and for thirty or more years