



Book Reviews—Contents

- 71 Kieran Scott: *The Art of Thomas Merton*
by Ross Labrie
- 72 Cornelius Welch, OFM: *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton*
edited by Deba Prasad Patnaik
- 73 Anthony Farrow: *Merton: A Biography*
by Monica Furlong
- 75 Alexander Di Lella, OFM: *Genesis 12-50. Commentary* by
Robert Davidson
- 76 John J. Schmitt: *God and His Friends in the Old Testament*
by Arvid S. Kapelrud

Book Reviews

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

Thomas Merton's life was a work of art. It contained all the aesthetic: conservation, tension, cumulation, anticipation. Ross Labrie's book concerns Merton the artist. It is a literary study of his writings, designed to show Merton's versatility in various forms—novel, diary, essay and poem. Labrie appropriately sets his writings in the context of his life, and illuminates his principal 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.