

Book Reviews

Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation by William H. Shannon, pp. 307, Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns and Oates, 2000. ISBN: 0867163488.

William Shannon really needs no introduction. His general editorship of the five volumes of Merton's correspondence along with his own books about Merton – *The Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* and '*Something of a Rebel*': *Thomas Merton, His Life and Works* – and his key involvement in the founding of the International Thomas Merton Society have made him a household name in Merton circles. His latest book, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey*, a major reworking of his 1981 book, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, is one of the best introductions to Merton's spiritual thought currently available. When Shannon first wrote *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* back in 1981 he was tackling the question "What did contemplation mean to Thomas Merton?" When he revised that book in 1987 Shannon had changed the question to "Where did contemplation lead Merton?" The revised text mainly dealt with this change of question in a new preface whereas *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* is an extensive revision of the original text and benefits from the integration of Shannon's changed perspective throughout the whole book as well as from Shannon's ongoing study of Merton over the last thirteen years.

Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey is divided into four sections and over the course of these sections Shannon distills the essence of Merton's thought on contemplation based on Merton's major books on the subject over the years. Shannon begins by examining Merton's early understanding of contemplation in books such as *What is Contemplation?*, *Seeds of Contemplation* and *The Ascent to Truth*. Section two looks at the discipline necessary for contemplation, specifically inner silence and solitude, and draws on *Thoughts on Solitude* and Merton's essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" from *Disputed Questions*. Shannon then moves on to look at Merton's more mature writings on contemplation, examining "The Inner Experience" as a transitional book between his earlier and later writings on contemplation, as well as discussing *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Contemplative Prayer* and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Finally, section four looks at the effect of contemplation on Merton, especially the change from his early attitude of fleeing the world upon his entry to Gethsemani to his later mature embrace of the world. Shannon draws on *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, some essays from *Contemplation in a World of Action* as well as referring to Merton's letters and journals to illustrate this change.

In Merton's view of contemplation the human person finds God through a dark path, the path of apophatic mysticism. When the person

reaches out blindly in trust and in love for God they find God in the deepest centre of their being and, having found the God of love, God's infinite love overflows into their life and is seen in their charitable actions towards their sisters and brothers.

My description of the content of this book is all too brief but, as the list of titles Shannon draws heavily upon suggests, all of Merton's main writings on contemplation are referred to and treated with a level of scholarship and understanding that is rare. Shannon's scholarship, his years of study and teaching, shine through in this book and, even more importantly, do not eclipse Merton's thought but allow it to radiate through clearly and succinctly. The reader can feel from the beginning that they are in safe hands.

I was particularly struck as I read this book by Shannon's integration of biographical information about Merton into the text. This helped to avoid the book becoming too heavy whilst also stressing the importance of the human in spirituality, we come to God with all of our history and that of our world, a factor illustrated by Shannon in Merton's life and writings. Shannon also points to autobiographical references in books such as *Seeds of Contemplation* and I felt I would be returning to Merton's classical spiritual writings from a new perspective because of this insight.

Shannon's original book, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, contained substantial excerpts from Merton's unpublished book "The Inner Experience" which has been serialised in the journal *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*. Sadly these excerpts have been omitted from *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* which is a shame for readers who are not familiar with this text and who do not have ready access to *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*.

This book also makes very little reference to Merton's poetic output and I felt that Shannon could have made more of this aspect of Merton's writings especially considering the emphasis Merton placed on literature, and especially poetry, in his monastic conferences. My final criticism is that Shannon's description of Merton's embrace of the world as a result of contemplation at times tended to view the world as solely North America whereas Merton's world view grew to encompass the whole world and, especially with his European background, was rarely limited to the shores of North America.

Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey is a book that I would not hesitate to recommend as a truly excellent introduction to Merton's writings on prayer. It is a book that is easily readable and which is based on a thorough knowledge and deep understanding of Merton's writings. It will, I believe, encourage readers to return to Merton's books on contemplation with renewed vigour and enthusiasm as they explore the many insights Shannon provides.

Paul M Pearson.