

needed support to be themselves. He writes to Chow, a Nicaraguan poet, in December 1962, "There does remain it seems to me at least a minimum of freedom and the power to speak one's own mind, even though what one says is not always respectable. This, it seems to me, is likely to be the place of the Christian writer and intellectual everywhere in the world. I think we have to be very careful of our honesty and our refusal to be swept away by large groups, into monolithic systems."

There might be nothing here we have not already read. But rather than that whoosh of reading that takes hold of us when we get a new Merton book, this book slows us down, and helps us get under the surface of the motive for the words and the sense this writer, this craftsman, this literary steel-worker dragging red-hot molten steel out of the furnace has of laying it before us so our minds and hearts are turned. This modest, small book will offer that. Inchausti has done some fruitful gleaning.

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Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours

ed. Kathleen Deignan

Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2007

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Those who heard Kathleen Deignan lecture at the Oakham Conference last year, or perhaps have read the text of the lecture, will doubtless be intrigued to see

this new publication, *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*. The book which has evidently been very carefully planned and beautifully produced, contains an anthology of Merton texts arranged over the course of a week, from Sunday to Saturday, with four times of prayer and meditation set aside each day at Dawn, Day, Dusk and Dark.

In her introduction to the book Kathleen Deignan speaks of the way in which Merton, "plagued by the same questions and afflictions which torment people of our time, lived deeply into a 'different wisdom' of the healing, illuminating and transformative Christian mysteries. His passion was to share this wisdom with those of us beyond the monastic enclosure... He understood his vocation to be a servant of the human quest for meaning, transcendence and communion – an explorer in realms of the human heart few of us dare to probe."

After such a striking and attractive introduction, I have to admit that as I got further into the book I began to feel strangely uncertain about some aspects of its method and approach. Why, I wondered, was the day divided into *four* times of prayer and reflection and why was each of these *four* divided into a number of smaller units, mostly with titles of their own, such as, "Psalm" or "Psalmic Prayer" or "Breath Prayer" some of which seemed helpful, some which were simply puzzling?

As I went further into the book, it seemed that while much of the Merton material was fascinating, a good bit of it seemed strangely unfamiliar. Here the notes at the end of the book proved extremely helpful. Clearly arranged and carefully set out they tell you where every

Merton passage in the anthology is to be found in his published works. There at once I saw how many of the passages were marked C.P., i.e. "The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton". Now I had to admit for myself that I have never been a very avid reader of Merton's poetic works. Furthermore I began to reflect on the fact that I have never been a great reader of his earlier writings. I never read *Seven Storey Mountain*, as a whole, not even in Evelyn Waugh's mildly expurgated version *Elected Silence!* It was *The Sign of Jonas* amongst the autobiographical writings which first really seized my attention.

Suddenly it struck me how much, in the last fifteen or so years, I have lived primarily on the writings of Merton which came from the last amazing decade of his life. This was the time in which he found himself turning to the world, more and more deeply concerned with the urgent need to work and pray for peace in a time threatened by nuclear war, and to work and pray for racial justice and harmony in a country still torn by conflict between Americans of different racial backgrounds. It was the time in which *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* first saw the light of day, a title which as I clearly remember greatly perplexed some Merton devotees who had been accustomed to the more peaceful and devout titles of many of his earlier books.

I am saying all this not at all because I feel altogether competent to stand in judgement over this Merton book of hours but rather because I feel that the book is in some ways standing over me. In Kathleen Deignan's introduction, I am made uneasy when she speaks of his "meteoric bursts of verbal luminosity",

and the "rich, outrageous lush and lavish language in which he spelled out a vision of existence stunning to the impoverished religious imagination of post-modern Christianity." Have we, I wonder, become too much accustomed to those solid volumes of prose which stand on our bookshelves, containing his journals and his amazingly varied correspondence during those last years?

Of course, I don't want to drive prose and poetry apart, to separate the mind from the imagination and from the feelings of the heart. Rather I would want, as Merton did, to try to bring them together. I have recently been struggling with a major book in Welsh on the writings of the present Archbishop of Canterbury; the author, a distinguished Presbyterian minister, heads one of his chapters "Mary and the Word" starting from the Archbishop's small book on the icons of Mary and then going on to look at his exposition of the Word in his preaching and teaching. The writer constantly stresses the fact that the Archbishop is not only a theologian, like some of his predecessors, he is also a published poet. I don't think that there has been such a figure in Canterbury in the last fourteen hundred and fifty years. It is perhaps no wonder that he writes about Merton with great insight and fellow feeling.

In a way which is not always recognized, Merton the poet was also drawn very close to one of the greatest Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. It was in 1966 that Hans Urs Von Balthasar published a small collection of Merton's poems, thirty eight in all, translated into German *Grazias Haus: Gedichte*, in English *Grace's House: Poems*. Merton was delighted with the result

and Von Balthasar himself writes in his introduction, "Often it is not clear whether Merton's vision ascends from the natural to the supernatural, or descends from the supernatural to the natural, and one realizes that such a distinction in poetry of this sort is completely unimportant. The whole miracle of the life of nature striving always more and more insistently towards unequivocal expression is ultimately grounded in the world's incarnation of the eternal life of the Trinity." It would be hardly surprising if in a small anthology the balance of these two movements was not always fully sustained.

As you see, I have found reviewing this small book of hours more difficult than I had expected. You may find yourself immediately drawn towards it, but it is possible that you too may feel some hesitation. In either case however, I think you would find you gain much by exploring it for yourself.

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Pax Intransitibus: A Meditation on the Poetry of Thomas Merton.

Frederick Smock

Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2007

ISBN 0972114467 (hbk) 91 pages

U.S. \$25

In this short but beautifully produced little volume Frederick Smock, Poet in Residence at Bellarmine University in Louisville, presents one of the few books about Merton's poetry specifically written

by a fellow poet. Smock has numerous books to his name, including four volumes of poetry – *Gardencourt*, *The Good Life*, *Guest House* and *Sonnets* – and from his own background in poetry he captures insights into Merton overlooked in many other works and then conveys those insights in delightful prose with a lilt of poetry.

Pax Intransitibus is a gentle introduction to Merton's poetry, not an academic tome. Smock opens up the major themes of Merton's poetry from his earliest poems right up to poems written in the final year of his life. Although gentle Smock does not avoid tackling the numerous issues Merton raises through his poetry, in particular, as the title of this book suggests, Merton's poetry dealing with war and peace, the nuclear arms race, racism, the media and technology. Many readers of Merton's poetry will be familiar with the categories in his poetry pointed out by George Woodcock ("poetry of the choir" and "poetry of the desert") or George Kilcourse ("poetry of the forest" and "poetry of paradise") and yet social issues are ever present throughout the whole extent of Merton's poetic output. Maybe a new category such as "poetry of engagement" could be added to the others? One just has to think of his reflections about Harlem in "Aubade – Harlem"; his attitude to war evident in poems written before his entry into the monastery and especially in the poem written on hearing of the death of his brother, John Paul, "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943"; and in such poems as "Hymn of Not Much Praise for New York City" which begin questioning the real and unreal city. These are all themes which would continue throughout his