

Part four contains "Footnotes to the Asian Journey of Thomas Merton." Five contributors expand the information in Merton's journals of his last encounters with Buddhism and the final days of his life. This anecdotal commentary on the final pilgrimage of Merton is full of his humanity and helps the reader to enter into a whole drama of the trip which Dr Thurston describes as "the outward and visible sign of the spiritual pilgrimage that was his life."

The final section, apart from the usual information on the contributors and the acknowledgements, presents a most useful and thorough bibliography on Merton and Buddhism compiled by Dr. Paul Pearson, who also provides the essay on the Zen photography of Thomas Merton.

The whole book seems to operate on at least two levels. First it gives us a fuller insight into the invaluable contribution that Thomas Merton made to the essential engagement with interreligious dialogue – I say essential because this is how it was described by Pope John Paul II. The book is also instructive and encouraging for those who wish to make either Zen or Tibetan Buddhist practice part of their own spiritual journey. Given the quality of this and the books already published in this series we can now eagerly look forward to the two future editions, Merton and Hinduism and Merton and Taoism.

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Thomas Merton: Master of Attention

Robert Waldron

Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2007

ISBN 023257148 (pbk) 101 pages
£9.95

Reviewed by Stephen Dunhill

This is the fourth book by Robert Waldron related to the life and work of Thomas Merton, each being an attempt, as the author states in the introduction to 'understand more deeply the man who sacrificed everything to pursue "GOD ALONE" (written above the Abbey of Gethsemani's entrance)'. The perspective and purpose is different in each book. Here Waldron states the purpose as being two-fold; first, to offer a new perspective on Merton and his prayer life, second, to encourage people not to give up on prayer. Some of its contents may already be familiar to Society members, as they formed part of the paper *Thomas Merton's Prufrockian Moment Transcended* the author delivered at Oakham in 2006, and that has subsequently been published in the Society's journal for Advent 2007.

After a brief introduction and a six-page well-written biography of Merton, the author starts to examine Merton's prayer life in more detail. For the years prior to entering Gethsemani Waldron concentrates on Merton's losing himself in something other, in particular great works of art, whether it be the Byzantine mosaics he first saw in Rome in 1933, or the paintings of Fra Angelico he saw at the World Fair in 1939; and finds close parallels in the writings of Simone Weil.

With judicious selections from the writings of both authors, he likens Merton's appreciation of Fra Angelico 'looking at this picture is the same sort of thing as prayer' to Weil's 'Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.' A later chapter shows how the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz had, in 1959, encouraged Merton to read Weil's works, though the response of both men to her work focussed more on her pacifist writings than her mystical works. Waldron claims that this is because she was not an 'orthodox mystic like St Francis' and 'may have felt more comfortable writing about this aspect of her life.'; but I think further research is needed here as her spirituality has been very influential, and Merton certainly eschewed the comfortable.

On entering Gethsemani Merton was forced to give up the visual arts. Instead his attention was focussed every waking hour on the scriptures, in particular the Benedictine *Lectio divina*. Waldron shows how, under the influence of such writers as Blake and Hopkins, Merton's attention widened away from the scriptures to embrace nature, so that by the time of the publication of *The Sign of Jonas* in 1952, he could write: 'By the reading of Scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me.' He concludes this chapter with an excellent exposition of the 'Hawk Attack' passage from *The Sign of Jonas*.

The next chapter, 'Alone with the alone', is the heart of the book. It shows how all the themes so far examined come together in a masterly exposition of how Merton's writing changed, under the influence of Zen, to the pared down, objective writing of his final years, with extensive quotes from *A Vow of*

Conversation written at the Hermitage. Waldron shows how Merton had finally attained the kind of pure attention he aspired to, Zen's direct seeing, the perfection of direct seeing.

The final chapters explore two elements of Merton's life, long suppressed, that came to the fore in his last years. As mentioned earlier Merton had largely to abandon the visual arts on entering Gethsemani, but as his attention flowered during his hermitage years, so did his artistic impulses; and these found an outlet through his abstract calligraphies, and through his photography. There is a chapter devoted to each. The calligraphies are less well-known than the photographs, but as Waldron points out, they are both capable of 'offering us glimpses of a world less forlorn, one fraught with divine vestiges, if we could only make the effort to convert our eyes to pay attention and Look!'

The final chapter, based largely on Waldron's 2006 paper, is about the feminine element in his life, for so long suppressed, which was released following his dream of Proverb, his encounter with a painting by Victor Hammer resulting in his poem Hagia Sophia, and which culminated with his love for the nurse known as 'M'. (Curiously, for an event that had such a disturbing and far-reaching effect on Merton's life, the author does not mention 'M' in the biographical chapter.) This chapter fits uneasily with the rest of the book, as it is not directly concerned with the stated purposes of the book; and I find some of the author's claims in this chapter rather far-fetched. Merton wrote about 'M' in his journals, but his *18 Poems* are not readily available, and 'M' has kept her

silence. My advice in this matter is to follow Wittgenstein: Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent. However at the end Waldron ties it all together, and shows how the flowering of these two elements are a further facet to the development of Merton's prayerful attention which culminated in his experience at Polannaruwa, of which he wrote that '... I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.'

The author clearly knows his Merton. He even quotes from the journal entry for 6th September 1965 which has exactly 17 syllables – a 'found' haiku to mirror Merton's 'found' poems:

*Magenta mist outside the windows,
A cock crows over at
Boone's farm.*

The book has sent me back again to *The Sign of Jonas*, to *A Vow of Conversation*, to look afresh at the photography, and to gaze again on Merton's calligraphies reproduced in Roger Lipsey's book, *Angelic Mistakes*. I hope many people buy this book and are similarly inspired.

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