

# Book Reviews

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## **Precious Thoughts**

Daily Readings from the  
Correspondence of Thomas Merton  
Selected and edited  
by Fiona Gardner  
Darton, Longman and Todd  
London, 2011  
ISBN 9780232528831  
(pbk) 175 pages  
£10.99

There are good precedents for spiritual leaders and theological pioneers to be known through their correspondence. There is something about the fact that a word of encouragement, an observation about the spiritual life or a reflection on the nature of God and of faith, was originally part of a per-

sonal exchange and had its context in a relationship, which adds an extra dimension to the words reproduced in print for a different audience. This selection of daily readings from the correspondence of Thomas Merton has about it that same resonance. Although the editor is keen not to distract the reader by citing the source of each reading except at the back of the book, it is interesting to scan to and fro to get a sense of who the original recipients were. The editor's hope is that, gathered in this way, 'there is another connection now made with us as the unknown recipients – the unknown readers.' I think she is largely successful in this aspiration.

I have to come clean and confess that I am not someone who has read all Merton's correspondence and who would therefore be qualified to comment on any omissions and oversights in Fiona Gardner's selection, or even fully to appreciate the care and skill evident in the process of sifting. I am a reasonably well-read fan of Merton, re-visiting his writing for those flashes of spiritual insight and challenge which spring off the page, and getting irritated by those moments when he is opaque and just the tiniest bit pretentious. *Precious Thoughts* had the usual effect on me, which I guess makes it vintage Merton.

The book is constructed simply, each month being introduced with one of Merton's illustrations and then proceeding through the days. I never did quite work out how the extracts fitted with the seasons (what seasons? which hemisphere?) but that was not a problem: each reading speaks for itself. The themes that emerge are classic Merton preoccupations: God's ultimate unknowability and beyondness; the utter poverty and smallness of man [sic]; the value of true solitude and the surrender to love; the contributions of Zen Buddhism to the spiritual life; the bankruptcy of modern society. There is wry self-deprecation, unsentimental advice and pithy verdicts on the Church, faith and false paths. Merton is a bracing correspondent but not an unsympathetic one.

The book's title, despite its pedigree as a quotation from Boris Pasternak, still had the wrong resonances for this reader, suggesting too much a book of whimsical gatherings. Reading it on a train I was aware that the cover was also seriously lacking in cool, and that something austere in black and white would both have made me feel better about displaying it, and more importantly, have reflected much more truly its actual contents. There is nothing sweet about Merton: he is tough, robust, sinewy, bracing, offering no easy comfort. 'Small grenades for daily lobbing' might have summed the book up better than 'precious thoughts.'

The preface says that the readings have been selected 'because they offer an opening into something other' and that they aim to 'provide a way into both silence and contemplative prayer' (Preface, p11). 'One effect of reading these extracts, one at a time, day by day, over a year, is to gradually lift us towards divinity' (p12).

Merton would surely have approved of this aim, not wanting anyone to dwell on the words as reflections of his own progress, position or anything else, but rather as a means of getting beyond the clamour of the ego to a place of prayer and self-emptying. Paradoxically, we have to empty Merton out of his words if they are to do the work he intended. Yet it is in part the light they shed on this complex and fascinating man that

draws the reader in. Perhaps we have to live with this contradiction as long as we are still human. It is Merton's gift to us that there are words to express something of that, words which constantly strive to reach beyond themselves and fall into the silence of God.

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### **A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton**

Rowan Williams

Fons Vitae

Louisville, Kentucky, 2011

ISBN 9781891785788

hardback, 100 pages

£16.99

In this short but beautifully produced little volume Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, has brought together his various writings about Thomas Merton, pieces written over a number of years, as his engagement with Merton's life and thought has continued, evolved and matured.

Many readers of *The Merton Journal* will be familiar with some of these essays as a number have appeared in these pages or in proceedings of the Thomas Merton Society's conferences - indeed some readers may well recall hearing the lectures themselves. Having heard three of them delivered, and

subsequently having read them over the years as they were published, I still found in these pages a freshness, depth and eloquence rarely found in Merton studies.

The earliest essay in this collection, "Bread in the Wilderness": The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov,' was initially a paper Dr. Williams delivered in 1973 at a Cistercian conference held in Oxford that year, and published in a volume edited by Canon A.M. Allchin entitled *Theology and Prayer*. Subsequently it has also appeared in a number of other publications. However, as Rowan Williams admits in his foreword, this was by no means his first 'engagement' with Merton as he'd been reading and wrestling with him since his teens. This chapter, a study of the monastic theology of Merton and Evdokimov, was originally one of the earliest pieces to address Merton's interest in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in particular the Russian émigrés writing in France. Merton's notebooks and journals from the fifties and sixties show how extensively he'd read their work. In this essay Williams stresses that at the heart of the monastic theology of both Merton and Evdokimov was their 'affirmation of oneself simply as a person, as a human being'. As Master of Novices at Gethsemani for ten years this concern of Merton's is clearly evident as he stresses that the novices need to be fully human before they can properly embrace the monastic