

ous interfaith dialogue, using Francis' interaction with the Sultan during the Fifth Crusade as an example, Horan points out that Benedict omits to acknowledge that he embarked on that mission against the orders of the then Pope!

A further Franciscan theme is Francis' deep love for God which deepened through his life. This theme becomes the central idea which structures Daniel Horan's second book, *Dating God*. Setting aside the slightly sentimental title, this is a great introduction to most of the themes dealt with in the more substantial *Francis of Assisi and the Future of Faith*. There are chapters on prayer, the true self, loneliness, solitude, contemplation, creation, the word and social justice. His relaxed and anecdotal style makes it an easier read and it is seemingly aimed at a young, undergraduate audience. It is nevertheless well worth reading, even if it is just to check it out before lending it to a younger friend!

A Franciscan writer called Francis Teresa once said that what Francis and Clare grew skilled at was human living and loving. Although the presence of St Clare is hardly discernible in these two books, the skill of human living and loving which Francis embodied lies at their heart. His appeal is modern by dint of its universality. As the manager of the Beatles, Brian Epstein once said, 'the next new thing is a good song'. If you want to explore the implications of Francis of Assisi's 'given-

ness' to life and to God, then these two books are well worth reading.

Martin Parrott has spent the last twenty years as a priest in the Anglican diocese of Wakefield and is currently a hospital chaplain in Halifax and assistant priest at St Jude's, Halifax.

Thomas Merton
– The Exquisite Risk of Love: The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance

Robert Waldron
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Robert Waldron has been a prolific author of (generally) short books on Thomas Merton, having either a psychological focus (*Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul* (1994); *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (2011)) or literary focus (*Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton* (2000); *Walking with Thomas Merton: Discovering His Poetry, Essays and Journals* (2002))—with *Thomas Merton: Master of Attention* (2008), reading Merton through the lens of Simone Weil's concept of attentiveness, somewhere in between. The literary books have in the main been better received than the psychological ones, which raises expectations for his latest offering, *The Exquisite Risk of Love*, a commentary on *Eighteen*

Poems, the limited edition volume of verse Merton composed in 1966 for the nurse with whom he had fallen deeply in love after undergoing back surgery in March of that year. It is therefore disappointing to report that the book itself is largely a disappointment.

This is not to say that there are not valuable insights to be found throughout the book. For example, he has cogent comments on the images of circles and orbits in the first two poems. He notes in his analysis of the third poem, 'I always obey my nurse,' the implicit contrast between being guided by M.'s instructions (medical and otherwise) and conforming to the monastic vow of obedience Merton had taken more than two decades earlier (pp.26-27). He points out some helpful connections with Blake (pp.79-80, p.82). He calls attention to the sequence of conditional sentences in the penultimate poem, 'For M. in October,' culminating in the brief but climactic 'If only you and I / were possible' (p.139). He has sensitive and sensible observations on the paradise imagery and the wisdom motifs that run through a number of the poems, but these discussions also signal part of the problem with the book, as they are considered in virtual isolation from these same themes as developed throughout the rest of Merton's work in both verse and prose. There is no indication of the importance of the motif of the return to Eden in essays such as 'The Recovery of Paradise'

or in his revelation, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, of the 'unspeakable secret' that 'paradise is all around us but we do not understand,' or in his evocation of the Edenic—'O paradise, O child's world!'—in the great poem 'Grace's House.' Waldron refers to Merton's dreams of the mysterious wisdom-figure Proverb but mentions only in passing 'the Hagia Sophia of 1959' (actually published in 1962) as though that seminal prose-poem were somehow to be considered no longer of much significance in the light of these new biographical developments, and he draws no attention to the pervasive importance of the 'sapiential' or 'sophianic' thread that links much of *Eighteen Poems* with what has preceded it.

In fact the perspective here is oddly dismissive of the rest of Merton's poetry, beginning with the comment in the Introduction that 'His poetry prior to *Eighteen Poems* was romantic and traditional with a preference for rhymed poems' (p.3); this is a very puzzling statement, as Waldron certainly must be aware that even from his earliest years as a poet Merton very seldom used regular rhyme, and the description of all his poetry up to 1966 as 'romantic and traditional' is so vague as to be meaningless, and takes no account of the changes in style and subject matter that distinguish the early 'poetry of the choir' from the austere, laconic 'poetry of the desert' that he began to write in the mid-1950s (to use categories

proposed by George Woodcock decades ago). He writes of 'Louisville Airport' that 'never before has his poetic line been as spare, simple and transparent' (p.40), a subjective judgement that a reader familiar with such poems as 'In Silence,' 'Stranger' (about which Waldron himself had written in *Poetry as Prayer*), 'Song for Nobody' or 'O Sweet Irrational Worship' might well challenge, along with the extravagant claim that immediately follows, that 'His verse attains a radiant clarity never before seen in his poems composed prior to this time' (p.40). Similarly the general claim 'that Merton's writing perspective suffered [!] a tremendous sea change when he met M.' and that 'Prior to M., Merton's writing was much involved in Catholic apologetics' (p.9) would draw little agreement from most Merton scholars, who certainly do not find Merton's increased openness to the world restricted to the final two years of his life but see it developing in the late 1950s. (The matter is further obscured by Waldron's subsequent statement—or fragmentary sentence: 'Not good writing because, although many admired it, it was fraught with compassion'—whatever that might mean.)

The root of the problem is already evident in the book's subtitle—*The Chronicle of a Monastic Romance*. Waldron makes frequent references to John Donne's love poetry throughout the book, but never refers to the lines in Donne's "The

Canonization' in which the poem's speaker says, 'And if no piece of chronicle we prove / We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms.' By approaching the sequence more as chronicle than as literature, more as biographical source material than as a work of art, Waldron fails to show why—or even whether—this set of poems is worth reading for its own sake, fails to do justice to the poetry as poetry.

Waldron dutifully progresses through each section of each poem, relying heavily upon paraphrase and often drawing on journal passages (generally cited but almost never quoted directly, presumably because of the expense of permission fees) to provide further biographical information, but he seldom develops a comprehensive overview of the structure or the thematic progression of an entire poem. Though Waldron states at the outset of his book that 'they are some of the best poems he ever composed' (p.3), he does not consistently provide the kind of careful exegesis that would support such a claim. His most provocative reading, in which he identifies the disruptive child in 'Never Call a Babysitter in a Thunderstorm' with Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox (p.66), is totally unconvincing; the lines 'In short my boy be careful of love / It fills the world with this destruction' make clear that while the initial situation finds Merton's phone call to M. being interrupted by the raucous child she is minding, the baby is eventu-

ally identified with Cupid, Eros, armed now not with bow and arrow but with 'Molotov cocktails bazookas and hand grenades' as he virtually holds the sitter hostage and makes conversation impossible. The book ends rather abruptly after the commentary on the final poem, with no concluding chapter considering the overarching pattern of the collection as a whole, which is actually closer in design to an Elizabethan sonnet sequence, charting the course of the stages of a relationship, than to Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, with its multiplicity of speakers (including a woman in one poem) and its dramatization of the entire spectrum of possible interactions between men and women.

Waldron seems unaware (or at least does not inform the reader) that Merton later included the first of these poems, 'With the World in My Bloodstream,' in the posthumous collection *Sensation Time at the Home* (found only in the *Collected Poems*), or that 'The Harmonies of Excess' (the sixth poem in the collection) became section 78 of Merton's 1968 'antipoem' *Cables to the Ace*, or that 'Never Call a Babysitter in a Thunderstorm' also appeared in the *Collected Poems*, in the 'Humorous Verse' section. He does mention that five of the poems are found in the journals (p.2), but specifically identifies only the earliest of these, 'Louisville Airport'; his consequent assumption that 'many mistakenly think it is his first poem about his relationship with M.' is

pure speculation with no documentary evidence. It also would have been helpful to readers to note that thirteen of the poems are now available in Lynn Szabo's edition of *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, but that volume is mentioned by Waldron only once (as *New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*), again in connection with 'Louisville Airport' (p.34).

Given Waldron's analytical skills, *The Exquisite Risk of Love* could have been a better book than it is. Author and readers were not well served by the publisher's accepting the work in its present form rather than requesting revisions that would give more emphasis to the poems' aesthetic qualities, to matters of form that Donne's 'Canonization' sums up in the image of the 'well-wrought urn.' This phrase provided the title for Cleanth Brooks' famous 1947 volume of explications of classic poems ("The Canonization' among them) that even in the very different critical climate of postmodernism still provides a salutary warning against the temptation to subordinate literature to biography, against an inclination to confuse sonnets with chronicles.

Patrick F. O'Connell is editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, as well as co-author of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. He has edited six volumes of Merton's monastic conferences and most recently Merton's *Selected Essays* (2013).