

Is this a meeting point that needs to be developed, a contemplative approach to all knowledge, leading to an undreamed of unity? Fr. Cowley, please write further.

Notes:

1. See his review in *The Merton Journal*, Advent 2018, of *A Course in Christian Mysticism*.
2. Lee Smolin: *Einstein's Unfinished Revolution: the Search for what Lies Beyond the Quantum* (London: Penguin, 2019), Preface.

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On Thomas Merton

Mary Gordon
Shambhala Publications
Boulder, Colorado, 2018
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What kind of writer was Merton? Award-winning writer and teacher Mary Gordon addresses the question directly in the first of four chapters which make up this small and refreshingly personal book. The second and third chapters each focus on a particular Merton book, and the final one a genre, his personal journals. Gordon tells us that Merton wrote to make sense of the world, and of himself as a writer (p.82). His doing so was a purposeful public vocation: he had 'a clearly imagined audience' in mind (p.83). And he would address them only ever as writer-monk.

Gordon empathises with the tensions implicit in what some have described as Merton's dual vocation - the 'conflicted anguish' (p.4) which she interprets as 'an intensified form of the conflict that strikes every artist, between artistic solitude and being a human in the world', between witness and aesthetic achievement (p.5). Gordon shows how another aspect of the underlying, generative tension comes through Merton's correspondence with Evelyn Waugh, which, amongst other things, illustrates contrasting approaches to the question of how the inexpressible - 'the mystical vision, the experience of God' (p.13) - can ever be communicated in language.

Merton's epistolary relationships with Waugh on the one hand and, on the other, with Czesław Miłosz, frame a section of Gordon's first chapter, in

which she traces Merton's evolution as a monastic writer, his thoughts about writing as art and as testimony, and the paradoxically liberating constraints of his monastic context. If Waugh gave Merton much needed advice about literary style, Miłosz, because he was not a native English speaker, had much more to say about content, though both, in their criticisms and advice, 'failed to take the problems of Merton's daily Trappist life into consideration' (p.19). With carefully-selected illustrations, Gordon effectively captures Merton's shifting moods, his determined search for perspective, the deep-seated sense of accountability and public responsibility, and recurring episodes of impatience and ambivalence. It was Waugh who edited for English readers the autobiography that projected Merton into public consciousness, and in her second chapter, Gordon focuses on that book, *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Acknowledging that Merton was, and all too often remains, insuperably tied to impressions created by *The Seven Storey Mountain* (p.41), Gordon selects episodes which demonstrate how the book 'presents us with the best and worst of Thomas Merton as a writer' (p.41). As example of the best, she turns to Merton's recollections of childhood; 'demotic but precise; fully realized sensually; moving slowly from the physical to the metaphysical, not pole-vaulting from one to the other, as he does in too many of his theological writings' (pp.56-57). In the worst writing Gordon finds a 'pious, closed, almost inhuman voice' (p.42), with Merton's writing 'falling back on a sentimental piety' (p.52), and diluting 'the searing image ... with a willed religiosity' (p.57).

It is the other early autobiographical mythology, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, which is the focus of the third chapter, an extended reflection on a work still too rarely acknowledged as the pivotal piece it was. In the strange world of *My Argument with the Gestapo* we find, says Gordon, 'in a particularly concentrated form the subjects that would dominate Merton's writing and his life' (p.68). If 'Merton's weaknesses as a writer are primarily formal' (p.64) then the form of this early venture profiles 'Merton's strengths as a master of description and sensual apprehension and frees him from some of the stiffness and artificiality that marks much of his prose' (p.65). Gordon confesses to finding the macaronic passages irritating and distracting, then cites, across many pages, sentences and passages which together leave a convincing impression of what it is about this work that renders it significant and worthy of careful attention.

In the fourth and final chapter, Gordon turns to Merton's personal journals, his 'best writing because in them he found the form that best suited his gifts' (p.87). It is the refreshing vitality of journal passages, contrasting with Merton's more self-consciously 'spiritual' publications, which appeals. Plenty of selections demonstrate her point, generally

focusing on Merton's evolving art and persistent struggles as a writer voluntarily constrained by religious discipline. 'Before reading Merton's journals I had never encountered such an articulate and extended examination of these grueling and insoluble problems, and this ... was the subject I felt called upon to examine' (p.5).

Of Merton's other writings, Gordon considers Merton's poetry and literary criticism to be unremarkable (p.6). She refers to 'the excessive abstraction that dehydrates much of his spiritual writing' (p.80). By way of criteria for evaluating his literary legacy, Gordon is surely right to cite Merton's late assessment of his writing as poor when 'it implies a lack of love, good insofar as there may yet have been some love in it. The best stuff has been more straight confession and witness.' (p.38, citing a journal entry of April 14, 1966).

I found Gordon's book a pleasure to read, and would include it amongst a top dozen recommended introductions to Merton. This is an astute evaluation, and a celebration, of the 'greatness of Thomas Merton: ardent, heartfelt, headlong. Life lived in all its imperfectability, reaching toward it in exaltation, pulling back in fear, in anguish, but insisting on the primacy of his praise as a man of God.' (p.133)

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Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-dissolution

Sonia Petisco

Forward by Peter Ellis

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Sonia Petisco is a Merton scholar and a gifted translator of Merton's poetry into her native Spanish. Her collection of eight previously published critical essays, along with the transcript of two interviews, presents the reader with a scholarly, stimulating and sometimes provocative analysis of Thomas Merton's poetic corpus. As Peter Ellis states in the foreword, the author's new and distinctive interpretation in these chapters go beyond scholarly enquiry, beyond even the discussion of self and gender, to expose, in Petisco's words, Merton's concern with 'the collective illusions of our separateness in our societies and languages' (p. 14).

In her introduction, the author offers us an overall theme to these papers, which aim to show 'how the quest for self-detachment and mystical