

Book Reviews

Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*. pp. xii, 308, Toronto: Stoddart, 1998. ISBN: 0773731326.

It is becoming a regular feature of the Merton industry that most years one or two biographies or interpretations of Merton's life and work appear. With the appearance in recent years of Merton's letters and his complete journals many early biographies and interpretations now seem primitive and poorly informed. There are some exceptions to this and Elena Malit's book *The Solitary Explorer* and Anthony Padovano's *The Human Journey* are two key interpretative texts which have stood the test of time. The appearance of so much primary material demands careful examination and hopefully new books will appear making good use of these materials.

Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton by Michael Higgins combines biography and an interpretation of Merton. Higgins uses William Blake, or more specifically Blake's four-fold vision, as his lens for this interpretation of Merton and to a large extent it is highly successful. Padovano's book on Merton I always felt was a poetic interpretation – one of its enduring qualities – and *Heretic Blood* I would place in a similar category. Higgins primarily sees Merton as a poet and, in using another poet as the interpretative lens, poetry is never far from his pen as he writes. In fact, like Padovano, there are times when Higgins' writing itself takes on a poetic quality. His concluding paragraph is an excellent example of his poetic, almost flowery, use of language:

Merton, the monk with "heretic blood," Blake's twentieth-century descendant, the extraterritorial quester, this very Merton, died as he had lived: electric and suffused with energy. (273)

Having alerted the reader to the poetic quality of this volume, both a redeeming feature and, at times, one of the book's pitfalls, I want to turn now to look briefly at Higgins' thesis.

In his introduction Higgins states boldly that "Merton is the William Blake of our time" (4) as he was "engaged in the same kind of spiritual and intellectual tasks." He then illustrates briefly some of the parallels between them both - artist, rebel, poet, social critic and heretic. After a general autobiographical chapter Higgins proceeds to explore Merton's life and work using Blake's "Four-Fold Vision: Intellect (Urizen), Emotion (Luvah), Instinct (Tharmas), and Wisdom (Urthona)." (10) In each of the following chapters Higgins then takes one of the Zoas or pillars of Blake's four-fold

vision and explores the way in which he believes Merton fulfills his understanding of it.

In "Tharmas: The Rebel" Higgins examines what he describes as Merton's instinct towards rebellion seeing in Merton the "embodiment of the rebellious impulse and native restlessness." (99) Higgins traces this element through Merton's pre-Gethsemani years and then sees his entry as to the monastery as a form of rebellion. But Merton took this instinct into the monastery with him and finds in the monastery, and in his abbot, new frustrations to feed his rebellion. In pursuing his thesis here Higgins, at times, becomes one-sided in his view of Merton's relations with those in authority, particularly Dom James Fox, and makes some tasteless and out of place puns on Dom James' name saying Merton was "outFoxed by his abbot" (103) and the "Fox waited." (228)

"Urizen: The Marginal Critic" Higgins presents Merton's development as a marginal critic as a development from his rebellious instinct. Various areas of Merton's critique are examined - his views on technology, language, monasticism, American society, war, racial issues and the arms race - and Higgins suggests Merton's poem *Cables to the Ace* was his attempt to "assist once again at the marriage of heaven and hell" with a "vision of humankind's wholeness or spiritual unity." (180/1) In "Luvah: The Lover" Higgins looks at a variety of Merton's relationships and suggests that his 1966 relationship with a student nurse healed Merton's "inner division" (214) and allowed him to recover the "affective side of his personality" (231) so allowing him to move towards final integration and the fourth Zoa "Urthona: The Wise One."

Higgins presents Merton's attainment of wisdom as the final development of silence, contemplation and universal empathy in Merton's life. Particular attention is paid in this chapter to Merton's poem *Hagia Sophia*, to his inter-faith dialogue, his critique of language and to *The Geography of Lograire* which Higgins suggests is Merton's "Blakean masterpiece" and the "final working out of the vision, the uniting of the four Zoas - Tharmas, Urizen, Luvah, Urthona." (261)

Unlike many writers on Merton's life and thought Higgins has not been afraid to refer, at times extensively, to Merton's poetry especially to the later works *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* which are frequently passed over.¹ Higgins makes good use of Merton's poetry and readers interested in a good introduction to this aspect of Merton's writings would do well to read this book.

Interspersed throughout this book are transcripts from interviews Higgins recorded with a number of people who either knew Merton or who have studied his work, people such as John Eudes Bamberger, Daniel Berrigan, Patrick Hart, Timothy Kelly, Michael Mott, Anthony Padovano and William Shannon. Higgins uses these transcripts judiciously and they add good

personal insights to his interpretation of Merton. Occasionally it was not very clear which interviewee Higgins was quoting from and it would have been useful if the quotes from interviews could have been footnoted as was the case with other quotes.

Heretic Blood is about Merton. There is very little information, biographical or literary, about Blake in it which may come as a disappointment to some readers. Similarly very little is made of Merton's life long interest in William Blake. At times I felt that Higgins was stretching his thesis almost to breaking point which was a shame as his interpretation of Merton using Blake's four-fold vision is a unique and valid one, though only one interpretation among many. Each writer on Merton employs their own lens with which to view him and, ultimately all the lenses together are needed to give the total picture of Merton.

1. George Woodcock in his book *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet* even goes as far as to suggest that these two works were aberrations in Merton's poetic output.

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Lawrence S. Cunningham. *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*. pp. xii + 228. Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999. ISBN: 0-8028-0222-2. \$16.00/£9.99.

Lawrence Cunningham of the University of Notre Dame has long been one of the most insightful commentators on Thomas Merton and his work. In this contribution to the Eerdmans "Library of Religious Biography" series (which includes volumes on such disparate figures as Gladstone, Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson and Aimee Semple McPherson), Cunningham states early on that "if this book can be said to have a thesis, it is that one simply cannot understand Thomas Merton if one does not understand him as a monk" (17). While by no means underestimating or undervaluing Merton's contributions as a literary figure or a social/political critic, areas that he treats in detail, he maintains that the "monastic vision" of his title provides the unifying element that makes all of Merton's various interests cohere. Merton's evolving experience of and reflection on the meaning of monastic life in general and of his own life as a Cistercian in particular were the determining factors, according to Cunningham, for "the direction of his writing, the interests he took up, and the styles he pursued" (17). As the first extended biographical treatment of Merton published since the appearance of the complete journals (including the third volume, *A Search for Solitude*, edited by Cunningham himself), the book "reveals a person who deeply imbibed monastic ideas,