

Echoing Silence, Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing.

Edited with an introduction by Robert Inchausti

New Seeds, Boston and London, 2007

ISBN 9781590303481 (pbk) 224 pages

UK £9.99/Cdn \$18

This book attempts to draw out from Merton's writings those pieces that illuminate his thoughts about the process of writing. There are six sections: Writing as a Spiritual Calling; The Christian Writer in the Modern World; On Poetry; On Other Writers; On His Own Writing; and Advice to Writers. In his introduction, Inchausti writes, "This book tells the story of how Thomas Merton progressed from an inwardly divided modernist to a stylistic innovator who used language reflectively to construct a critique of itself. And though he moved in and out of particular interests...what is most consistent...is his perennial return to origins, to emptiness, and to God."

Writing on writing, there's a conundrum, but one that Inchausti has embraced with zest and love. Perhaps love is a bit rich, but we need some sort of word that indicates that same passion with which Merton conveyed the meaning he discovered so richly in so many aspects of human experience. Merton absolutely gave himself to his pen and his paper and his thoughts. Writing and communicating through writing were his great gifts, and he poured his energy into them. Jim Forrest has a story of passing Merton's door and watching him pounding at the typewriter. It was as if Merton was transported into another world: the energy, the thoughts pouring out, Merton was a con-

duit for a flood of wisdom. He bares his soul, he laughs out loud, he mulls over texts, he is ironic, cryptic, and utterly see-through, by turns. He was so happy swimming in the water of words.

For most of us who never met Merton in the flesh, so to speak, we only have his words. For most of us it was his words that first introduced him to us. We got to know him through those amazing sentences that led us on, and on, and with scarcely giving ourselves time to breathe. We were so keen to stay on track with something that was absorbing us completely. We had to keep devouring this verbal spirituality, and this sense of being with him, in the words, in the dark church, at Oakham, at the night office. The alchemy of words brewed up a conversion of manners in us. This anthology makes us question how that process of writing worked.

The book allows us to spend time on thinking how Merton actually felt his words were working, and how the writing of others worked for him. There was a time in America when Merton lived intensely among writers and teachers of writing: Bob Lax, Mark van Doren, Bob Gibney, Seymour Freedgood were the people Merton called "the fountains of grace". Merton found himself in a culture of writing in New York. The orphaned English schoolboy found a family of wordsmiths, and something remarkable was released. The small swimming pool of Oakham poems turned into an Atlantic Ocean of literary possibilities.

These excerpts from his writings are glimpses behind the scenes of a whole library of books. They contain hints of how he felt his writing might be working, helping, and being a guide to others who

needed support to be themselves. He writes to Chow, a Nicaraguan poet, in December 1962, "There does remain it seems to me at least a minimum of freedom and the power to speak one's own mind, even though what one says is not always respectable. This, it seems to me, is likely to be the place of the Christian writer and intellectual everywhere in the world. I think we have to be very careful of our honesty and our refusal to be swept away by large groups, into monolithic systems."

There might be nothing here we have not already read. But rather than that whoosh of reading that takes hold of us when we get a new Merton book, this book slows us down, and helps us get under the surface of the motive for the words and the sense this writer, this craftsman, this literary steel-worker dragging red-hot molten steel out of the furnace has of laying it before us so our minds and hearts are turned. This modest, small book will offer that. Inchausti has done some fruitful gleaning.

David Scott is Rector of St Lawrence with St Swithun in Winchester, Warden of the Diocesan School of Spirituality.

Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours

ed. Kathleen Deignan

Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2007

ISBN 978-1933495057 (hbk) 223 pages

U.K. £9.99/Cdn \$19.60

Those who heard Kathleen Deignan lecture at the Oakham Conference last year, or perhaps have read the text of the lecture, will doubtless be intrigued to see

this new publication, *Thomas Merton: A Book of Hours*. The book which has evidently been very carefully planned and beautifully produced, contains an anthology of Merton texts arranged over the course of a week, from Sunday to Saturday, with four times of prayer and meditation set aside each day at Dawn, Day, Dusk and Dark.

In her introduction to the book Kathleen Deignan speaks of the way in which Merton, "plagued by the same questions and afflictions which torment people of our time, lived deeply into a 'different wisdom' of the healing, illuminating and transformative Christian mysteries. His passion was to share this wisdom with those of us beyond the monastic enclosure... He understood his vocation to be a servant of the human quest for meaning, transcendence and communion – an explorer in realms of the human heart few of us dare to probe."

After such a striking and attractive introduction, I have to admit that as I got further into the book I began to feel strangely uncertain about some aspects of its method and approach. Why, I wondered, was the day divided into *four* times of prayer and reflection and why was each of these *four* divided into a number of smaller units, mostly with titles of their own, such as, "Psalm" or "Psalmic Prayer" or "Breath Prayer" some of which seemed helpful, some which were simply puzzling?

As I went further into the book, it seemed that while much of the Merton material was fascinating, a good bit of it seemed strangely unfamiliar. Here the notes at the end of the book proved extremely helpful. Clearly arranged and carefully set out they tell you where every