

Book Reviews

Dialogues with Silence: Prayers and Drawings. Thomas Merton. Edited by Jonathan Montaldo. HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. ISBN: 0060656026.¹

Dialogues with Silence brings together for the first time two central elements of Merton's life that are frequently overlooked – namely a collection of his prayers gathered from a variety of sources, including his journals, books, poems and letters along with a selection of his drawings, abstract art and calligraphies, largely unfamiliar to most of the readers of his work.

With Merton's phenomenal literary output it can be difficult to remember that he was at heart a monk and a contemplative. The rhythms of the monastic life, seven periods in choir each day along with time for *lectio divina*, meditation and contemplation, were central to his life. Out of this fertile soil Merton bore the good fruit that draws people back to his work time and time again, and continues to attract new readers. Within his writings the intensity of his own spiritual life can easily be overlooked because he seldom wrote or spoke about it explicitly. Yet, scattered throughout his writings are the prayers that Jonathan Montaldo has gathered together in this volume, prayers that I think readers, myself included, have sometimes passed over all too quickly as we race to devour Merton's every word. In this volume the reader is forced to slow down, to stop and savor these prayers and reflections. The reader is compelled to join with Merton in his "Dialogue with Silence."

The reader is aided in this by a fine assortment of drawings gathered together in this volume and interspersed throughout the prayers. As a child of artists art was in Merton's blood. Many of his readers are mostly familiar with his use of the written word, but Merton himself recalls in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that from his very earliest attempts at writing when he was a child in France in 1926 these writings were "profusely illustrated in pen and ink" drawings.² Very few of these early literary and artistic works have survived³ but there are many examples of his drawings from his time at Columbia University available⁴ and a wealth of drawings from his time at Gethsemani – over eight hundred are archived at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, from which the selections of drawings in this volume are made, with many more in private and public collections elsewhere.

The majority of the drawings in this volume are Merton's representational drawings from the earlier years of his monastic life – drawings of austere saints, female visages, Christ crucified, monks and the Abbey of Gethsemani – with surprisingly few of his later, more abstract, drawings which reflect his interest in Zen and other Eastern cultures. Considering these more abstract drawings and calligraphies represent such a large percentage of his

drawings they are under-represented in this volume. The abundance of female images presented in this book, described as Merton's "most powerful and mysterious" (xvii) drawings, could make the reader wonder if Merton was expressing some subconscious reaction to the all-male regime of the monastic community when in fact they make up a smaller percentage of his drawings than this book would seem to suggest.

Similarly the majority of prayers in this volume are taken from the earlier part of Merton's monastic life with by far the greatest number coming from his journal *Entering the Silence*, with only one prayer coming from the final three volumes of his complete journals. A few later prayers appear from his letters and poetry but the greater part are taken from his earlier writings.

In introducing this volume Montaldo does not evaluate the material he has selected or to give any idea as to his criterion for selection. The selection of Merton's prayers and drawings contained in this volume are not representative of the over four hundred prayers and many more drawings that Merton produced, but reflect more his early years in the monastery rather than his final ten years when his horizons broadened so dramatically. Thus many of the prayers quoted reflect the more conservative side of Merton's writings. Understandably some of Merton's later abstract drawings and calligraphies are hard to comprehend but meditating on them could be an equally fruitful path to silence as meditating on his more representational drawings. Some form of introduction to his drawings might also have been helpful for readers encountering them for the first time. In fact, Merton's own essay on his abstract drawings and calligraphies, "Signatures: Notes on the Author's Drawings," printed in the United States edition of *Raids on the Unspeakable*, could have been the ideal accompaniment to the inclusion of some of his later drawings in *Dialogues with Silence*.

Having said that this beautifully presented volume is not an academic treatise on Merton's prayers and drawings but a pathway into the prayers and silence of his monastic life. Montaldo expresses this succinctly in his introduction writing that these prayers and drawings are relics of Merton's contemplation, not his life of contemplation itself. Placed side by side, they can virtually draw us into the real presence of that silence, that expectancy, and that yearning that must have characterized Merton's secret, unspoken, and unrevealed dialogues with God. (xv.)

This is a book that avid readers of Merton will treasure whilst also serving as an attractive and stimulating introduction to him for new readers.

Paul M Pearson

Notes and References

- 1 This volume is due to be published in the United Kingdom by SPCK in February 2002. ISBN: 0281054908.
- 2 Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. (London: Sheldon Press, 1975): 52.
- 3 Thomas Merton, "The Haunted Castle," *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994): 7-10, is the earliest of these manuscripts and dates back to Christmas 1929.
- 4 A good selection of Merton's drawings from his time at Columbia can be found in Edward Rice's book *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970)

Brendan the Voyager, we recall, was one of Ita's early charges at Killeedy. *Herefordshire Poems* brings the poet to our familiar English terrain, though again on the edge of things. Herefordshire is on the border of England and Wales. We are taken to the exotically carved church of Kilpeck, a great wonder of the border country. It is the 'weirds' that haunt the poet, and influence this part of the journey, the exotic, the awkward, and how that can be brought in and reconciled to the Creator God of all life.

The *Sheela-na-gig*, "squatting under the eaves/ lewdly grinning down at us", could well have been taken down by the Victorians, and omitted from these kindly pages, but no, it is brought in. With great deftness and wide sympathy the odd thing becomes a metaphor for integration not hiding: she

is:
one which explored
a woman's body and found
treasures in darkness
and riches in secret places.

The last is best, *Returning and Rest*. These are nine brief movements of a perfect, miniature symphony. Bonnie's poems take the time and find the pace to conclude well. The light that has been illuminating each poem, and there is an amazing clarity about them, here becomes a meeting with God, in private prayer made public. They are as natural and as supernatural as can be. I wish I could quote them all.

It is you, O God,
filling my house
with clarity and Presence
with that life
which is Light.

It looks easy, but to write that without the tiny excesses of sentiment, or the fussy complication of adjectives, is not easy. It comes from practice, and prayer, and penitence. St John comes to mind, and Bonnie's final acknowledgement is to the point, "Most of all, thanks be to the Word".

David Scott

Reading Thomas Merton: A Guide to His Life and Work. John Laughlin. Xlibris, 2000. ISBN: 0738856134.

As the title of this book suggests John Laughlin's book has been written to introduce readers to Thomas Merton, both to his life and his writings, and provide some evaluation of the books and other materials available by, and

about, Merton. Laughlin's approach is broad, including sections on Merton web sites, tapes of Merton's conferences, dissertations about him, the best places to purchase books, and what to expect when visiting a monastery. It is described in the publishers blurb as "an enticing guide through the forest of Merton literature" and as "the perfect starting place for anyone who wanted to read Merton but did not know where to begin." The error in the publisher's blurb, surely it should read "didn't know where to begin," is a foretaste for the reader of what is to come on opening the pages of this book.

Reading Thomas Merton is littered with errors, factual and grammatical, from beginning to end. The opening paragraph of his biographical section begins by describing Merton as "a French nationalist" (13) because of his birth in France; he gives his reader the date of Owen's death as "October 4, 1931" (28) instead of January 1931, although he uses the correct date in his chronology of Merton's life (86); more than once he describes the Merton scholar Victor Kramer as "a longtime friend" of Merton's (46, 173) and yet Kramer never met or corresponded with Merton. Similarly almost every single web site address (url) and e-mail address quoted is either out of date or wrong.

Besides the problem with the errors in this book I did not find that it was a book that would inspire me to go away and read more about Thomas Merton. Laughlin's style of writing is tedious and torpid and really at no point does he allow the genius of Merton's work and thought to shine through.

The overall idea of this book is laudatory but it falls far short of that ideal. The publisher of *Reading Thomas Merton*, Xlibris, is a vanity press and the lack of an editorial pen is only too evident in this book. William Shannon's book '*Something of a Rebel*': *Thomas Merton, his Life and Works* still remains the best introduction for newcomers to Merton and the most "enticing guide through the forest of Merton literature" currently available.

Paul M Pearson

A Journey with John Jacob Niles. Jacqueline Roberts and Kerstin Warner. University of Kentucky Libraries, 2001. ISBN: 0917519086.

This volume is a memoir of Jacqueline Roberts' years of performing with the Kentucky composer and balladeer John Jacob Niles. It is of interest in Merton circles as John Jacob Niles set twenty-two of Merton's poems to music in the Niles-Merton Song Cycle. This project began with Opus 171 which was completed before Merton's death and which Merton heard performed by Jacqueline Roberts at the Niles home in 1968. Opus 172 was composed after Merton's death.

The book is based on Jacqueline Roberts' memoirs of John Jacob Niles along with many sections of transcripts from John Jacob Niles talking

about his music to audiences. Niles comes over as feisty, self-opinionated and chauvinistic – a real character, a person who I would imagine people either loved or hated.

Two complete chapters focus on the Niles-Merton Song Cycle, but it is mentioned throughout the book because of the effect it had on both the composer and Jacqueline Roberts, who regularly performed the songs. Niles expressed the effect in one of the transcripts included here saying:

I started these two cycles, Opus 171 and 172, with “The Messenger” 3 years ago, and though it was the most moving musical and creative writing experience of my entire life, many times I have wished I had never heard tell of this wonderful “Poetic” material. It taught me a new kind of music composition and the writing of poetry.

P.S. For me nothing has ever been the same. (63.)

Of its nature this memoir is rather rambling, but it does present an insight into the Niles-Merton Song Cycle and into one of Merton’s Kentucky friendships.

A compact disc has also been produced to coincide with the publication of this book. It includes a selection of John Jacob Niles’ songs including nine songs from the Niles-Merton Song Cycle.

Paul M Pearson

OUR REVIEWERS

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