



Ross Labrie *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*. Columbia, MO & London: University of Missouri Press, 2001. ix + 263 pp. ISBN: 0-8262-1382-0. £29.50/\$34.95.

FOR MORE than two decades, Ross Labrie has been a strong and persuasive voice in fostering a literary appreciation of the work of Thomas Merton, particularly in his groundbreaking study *The Art of Thomas Merton* (1979) and more recently in his chapter on Merton in *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (1997). His new book is a richly detailed examination of how Merton's quest for a holistic vision, grounded not only in the Christian contemplative tradition but also in Anglo-American Romanticism, is developed in relation to a broad variety of topics and across a wide range of genres throughout Merton's career as monk and author. Labrie seems to have two distinct audiences in mind: those with a strong interest in literature who may not be very familiar with Merton, presented here as a latter-day representative of the Romantic tradition of Blake and Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau; and long-time readers of Merton who may be less aware of the literary than of the religious sources of his characteristic vision. Both groups are well served by Labrie's careful and insightful reflections. The principal focus of Labrie's attention, as his title suggests, is the imagination, understood in two interrelated ways: as the creative faculty, the source of literary productivity, and more fundamentally as the intuitive capacity to recognize the "hidden wholeness" underlying disparate phenomena, the ontological Ground uniting all reality—imagination in the Coleridgean sense, as distinguished from the more limited faculty of the "fancy." Labrie traces this dual power of the imagination, to see and to make, through

the eight chapters of the book, all but the last arranged as commentaries on pairs of interrelated topics.

In his introductory chapter, "Romanticism and Mysticism," Labrie considers how the common emphasis on a wholeness transcending the dualistic separation of subject and object, observer and observed attracted Merton at the time of his conversion both to Romantic poetry and to the Christian mystical tradition, a double source of inspiration which continued to reinforce and corroborate one another throughout his life. Labrie suggests that what appealed to Merton about the Romantics was

their search for inclusive understanding to reunite the parts of the mind and to unite this restored mind in turn with the objects that the mind observed (6).

From this perspective, the true artist, like the authentic mystic, is one who has an intuitive recognition of the unity of one's own being with Being itself, and consequently with all reality grounded in this same Source. Thus according to Labrie Merton found in the Romantics a literary tradition compatible with the Christian contemplative tradition to which he was so strongly drawn.

In the second chapter, "Consciousness and Being," Labrie examines Merton's fundamental understanding of contemplative awareness as an intuition of and participation in Being in its totality, as opposed to the analytic rationalism of so much of modern thought since Descartes, which has left persons alienated from the world around them, from one another, and from their own authentic selves grounded in God. In this chapter Labrie also points out that for Merton the *via positiva* of imagination, word and symbol complements rather than conflicts with the apophatic *via negativa* of darkness and emptiness beyond concepts:

As a contemplative he used both approaches for different kinds of consciousness of God (39).

In chapter 3, "Solitude and the Self," Labrie considers the ways in which a withdrawal from the busyness of unreflective activity was seen by Merton not as a diminishment but as a heightening of the sense of participation in the fullness of reality. Labrie shows that for Merton authentic solitude strips away illusions of a self based on achievement and provides

an inclusive view of society in which social relationships were perceived through an ontological lens, thus allowing one to see society in a fuller and therefore truer light (64).

The fourth chapter, "Nature and Time," examines Merton's response to the natural world as a manifestation of divine creativity and love:

the mind and nature in Merton formed a continuum based upon a resemblance, . . . a similitude found in the realization of a sharing in being (88).

In the tradition of such American Romantics as Emerson and Thoreau, Labrie notes, Merton thought of nature emblematically as a text by which the mind could read ultimate reality ((90) a connection reinforced by discussion of such texts as "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and the poem "Love Winter When the Plant Says Nothing."

Chapter 5, "Paradise and the Child's Vision," focuses on Merton's pervasive use of the image of the spiritual journey as a return to the "primordial unity" (123) of a paradise consciousness, articulated in such widely disparate sources as the Desert Fathers, Pasternak, and Chuang Tzu, as well as in descriptions of personal experience such as the Fourth and Walnut vision.

In the following chapter on "The Imagination and Art" Labrie emphasizes Merton's own stress on the ontological over the psychological dimension of the imagination,

the imagination as a means of attaining truth or reality either through imaginative discernment or through the creative joining of things together to restore their original unity (151).

Imagination is seen as a way of transcending the reductiveness of rationalism that Merton sees, according to Labrie, as not only aesthetically barren but ethically dangerous, as it can lead to the conformity of an Eichmann or of the concentration camp commandant whose voice is heard in "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces" (152-53). Whereas reason is able to perceive signs, only the imagination is capable of recognizing, and expressing, symbols, which participate in the reality that they signify and so contribute to the unifying effect of art, which always has the fullness of being at least implicitly as its horizon.

Chapter 7, "Myth and Culture," discusses myth as the shared vision of a particular culture. Merton's response to various cultures and their defining myths, American (North and South), European, and Asian, is considered, with particular attention to the cultural dimensions of Merton's mature political and social criticism, which examines not merely specific issues but underlying worldviews.

In the final chapter, "Individuation, Unity, and Inclusiveness," Merton's allegiance to personalism as an alternative to an atomistic individualism and to social conformism is explored in the context of his relation to his own monastic community as well as to the wider society.

This book is an impressive, challenging, and in the main convincing consideration of Merton's holistic spiritual and literary vision. While much of the originality and value of Labrie's approach lies in his following Merton's own late preference for "his creative writing" to "the sometimes rather stylized books on meditation with their express, didactic purposes" (242), the

emphasis on his holistic vision would certainly have been enhanced, for example, by some apt citations, in the chapter on the recovery of paradise, from *The New Man* (never quoted throughout the entire book), which contains perhaps the most extensive discussion of this theme in Merton's work, and in the chapter on the self by reference to Merton's fundamental distinction between true and false selves, particularly as found in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (which is quoted only twice, neither time on this topic). Incorporation of such material would have been especially useful for those readers not already conversant with Merton's work. Conversely, the connection with the Romantics could have been highlighted a bit more: there is virtually no mention of Romanticism in the second chapter, and only a passing reference to Wordsworth (69) and another to Rousseau (73).

It would also have been interesting, in terms of the main theme, to have been provided with a more extended discussion of the implications of an intriguing quotation from Chesterton, who questions the primacy of unity and champions the idea that authentic love retains the distinctive identities of the lovers (115-16). Might it be true for Merton also that his imagination could be termed not only inclusive but "trinitarian," that ultimately his aim was not simply "to resolve multiplicity into oneness" (40) but to affirm simultaneously both unity and distinction, both Being and Love, within the Divinity itself and between Creator and creation? Such a stance would actually be consistent, as Labrie himself suggests (40), with Merton's appreciation for the notion of "inscape," the irreducibly unique individual identity of a thing, of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his own idiosyncratic way an heir of the Romantics

and arguably as influential a model for Merton as any other single poet. This is an aspect of the topic that merits further exploration.

What the author does provide, however, is as it stands a clear, comprehensive, stimulating and cogent presentation of a major aspect of Merton's thought and art. A product of exacting scholarship, it is also attuned to the significance of Merton's inclusive imagination for the ways people understand and live their lives. For example, in a passage that has taken on deeper resonances than it would have had not only in Merton's lifetime but even when Labrie wrote it, the author points out Merton's belief that there was one major advantage to the attack against human dignity posed by the modern world: contemporary perils and horrors might alert human beings to the eschatological choices that lay before them and might otherwise be overlooked in a more benign-looking secular culture. (113).

In alerting us to these choices, as made by Merton and posed to ourselves, choices of unity rather than division, inclusiveness rather than exclusion, integrity rather than fragmentation, Labrie's fine book reminds us why Merton continues to be a trustworthy, even an essential, guide for the human spirit in this new century.



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