

Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton

Paul Pearson

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This book has been a joy to read. On opening the book one is greeted by the well known image of the joyful Merton by his photographer friend Ralph Eugene Meatyard, setting the tone for this journey into Merton's photographic explorations.

In the introduction we are reminded that Merton came from an artistic background. His artist father from New Zealand and his American mother interested in decorative interior design met in Paris when pursuing their artistic careers. When his father died in 1931 at the age of 43 his obituary in the London *Times* said that 'had he lived longer he would have earned a wide reputation as an artist (p.vi).' I think it would be true to say that their son Thomas ran with that artistic baton and inspired others in ways his parents could never have dreamed of.

Merton appeared to have had very little interest in photography until the late 1950s. His interest was set alight by the book *The Family of Man* that he bought in 1958 'for a few pennies' on a visit to Louisville. It was based on a photographic exhibition at the MOMA in New York, brought together by Edward Steichen after the 2nd world war as a forthright declaration of global solidarity cast in the form of a photo essay celebrating the universal aspects of the human experience. It attracted many famous photographers of the time, among them Robert Capa, Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams. On reading the catalogue Merton wrote in his journal: 'How scandalised some would be if I said this whole book is to me a picture of Christ and yet that is the truth (p.xii).' This statement is included in the same diary entry as his 'Louisville Epiphany'. He was moving from being the world-denying monk to one embracing the whole world. From this time on he met and communicated with photographers including Sybille North who took some formal photographs of Merton and John Howard Griffiths, famous for the book *Black like Me*, who was given permission by the abbot to begin a photographic account of Merton's life.

After an excellent essay by Paul Pearson, the book is divided into five chapters which each have a brief introduction followed by Merton's own photographs, many laid out with a quote from Merton on the opposite page which helps us to reflect on the hidden depth of the images

presented to us. The more prosaic the image the more we are drawn towards asking how we relate to those objects in our own lives

The first chapter, 'The Paradise of Place: Gethsemani and Pleasant Hill', features photographs of Gethsemani and its environs giving us images of an open barn door, a weaving basket, tree roots, a watering can outside the Hermitage, snow covered fields — all such everyday objects and views used by his camera as a contemplative tool to reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary. As Paul Pearson points out, St Benedict instructed the monks to treat all the property of the monastery as if it were sacred vessels of the altar. Paradise truly is all around us if everything potentially becomes a source of wonder and worship. Also included are photographs of the nearby Shaker village at Pleasant Hill, where Merton found 'some marvellous subjects'. He made the clear link as he saw it between the Shakers' spiritual life and everything that they produced. It showed an attention to form and detail that clearly displayed the sense of the sacred in all created objects, recording that: 'There is no doubt in my mind that one of the finest and most genuine religious expressions of the nineteenth century is in the silent eloquence of the Shaker craftsmanship (p.5).'

The second chapter is titled 'A Hidden Wholeness: Zen Photography'. The term, Zen Photography, according to Paul Pearson, was first used by Merton in the sixties. He was one of the first to use it although it is now commonly used in books of photography. Merton found in Zen what for him was missing in the majority of Catholic teaching and the monasticism of the 20th century, though, as he discovered, it was there always to be found in the Mystics and Church Fathers. Zen tradition provides the practice to access this inner spiritual world, to provide the tools to see that this world is indeed, in the words of Gerald Manley Hopkins, 'charged with the grandeur of God', to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, to live in the present moment, to pay attention to what is, rather than endless speculation of what might be. These instructions and practices are precisely what is required of the photographer. Merton used the camera as a 'contemplative tool'. According to his friend, the poet Ron Seitz, Merton said to him that he needed to 'stop looking' and to 'start seeing', that looking implies you already have something in mind, whereas seeing is 'being open and receptive to what comes to the eye, your vision total and not targeted (p.52).'

In the third chapter, 'Shining Like the Sun: Friends and Faces Radiating the Spark in the Soul', we have images of friends and people he encountered both in America and on his trip to Asia. In this chapter Paul Pearson refers to Rilke's 'inseeing' as a clear influence on Merton, and

says that the 'shining images' that Merton experienced in Louisville is that which he tried to capture when taking photographs of friends and strangers. In the faces from Asia, despite the terrible poverty and deprivation he witnessed, their photographs tell the story of the human face in all its beauty, charm and dignity, revealing a sense of the oneness of the human race despite all its differences.

In the fourth chapter, 'Woods, Shore, Desert, East: The Pilgrim', we have images of landscapes — California, New Mexico, Alaska, the Far East — from which one gains the sense that they demonstrated to Merton a very powerful sense of the illusory nature of the images he carried in his mind: 'The country which is nowhere is the real home (p.166).' For Merton, 'Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth deepening and an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts (p.186).'

In the final chapter, 'The Joyful Face behind the camera: Images of Merton', Paul Pearson has assembled a wonderful collection of images of Merton himself from across his adult life. The joyful face indeed! These images embody the sense of joy that permeates this book, the great celebration of what it is to be human and to exist in a world that constantly presents itself to us as mystery and beauty. The outstanding photograph for me is by Sybil Akers in which she has captured in Merton a vulnerability, a fragility, almost a fear of the enormity of the road he faithfully undertook to follow (p.216). But there is also the happy, smiling, mischievous Merton. His humour was a great ally on this journey of discovery and he used it to great effect throughout his life. In the closing pages Paul Pearson comments on the fact that Merton's humour has not been studied in depth despite its prevalence in his life. Maybe the next book...?

The book is beautifully presented and produced. The images are not all crowded in, their wide spacing combined with the overall simplicity of design drawing one in to a place of calm reflection. I will continue to enjoy this book, a wonderful reminder to remember to keep 'seeing' rather than 'looking'. I think anyone interested in Merton, indeed anyone who is drawn to the numinous, would be richly rewarded by seeing the world through the lens of his camera.

Patricia Higgins is a retired teacher who lives in London. She has served on the TMS committee since 2014. She has become increasingly interested in the nature of the relationship between mysticism and resistance. She is a member of the WCCM (World Community of Christian Meditation) and is actively involved in issues around the cause of the Palestinians and that of the environment.