

Praying with a Poet

Review of

Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton

By Robert Waldron

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Reviewed by **Lynn Szabo**

In his recent book *Poetry as Prayer: Thomas Merton*, Robert Waldron takes up the challenge of writing about Merton as both a literary artist and a spiritual master. Complete with endorsements, foreword, introduction, and endnotes, this short study suggests a worthwhile approach to its subject. Its eight chapter-headings promise discussions of poetry as prayer, Thomas Merton as monk and poet, offerings “From Merton’s Pen,” as well as meditations on three well-chosen Merton poems: “Elias –Variations on a Theme,” “Night-Flowering Cactus,” and “Stranger.” Its seemingly well-choreographed framework serves nonetheless to underscore the immensity of approaching Merton’s poetry simultaneously from theological, literary and devotional perspectives. The latter is its overarching purpose and the work concludes with Waldron’s suggestions for “Ten Steps to Reading Poetry in a Holy Way.”

As he proceeds, Waldron makes a number of fascinating claims about Merton’s poetics, not the least of which is that “[i]n the Psalms, Merton discovered the reconciliation of his earlier conflict in believing poetry and contemplation antithetical” (49). With *Bread in the Wilderness* as his platform, Waldron argues that when a “reader enters the Psalms, he stands before Christ upon the Cross; he enters into his suffering; he becomes one with it” (47). Waldron concludes that Merton locates his Christology in this experience of the Psalter; ensuing from his understanding of “the lyric power of the Psalms as well as their mystery and sacredness” (48), Waldron explains, is the integration of Merton’s vocations as poet and monk. Although grounded in the paradigm of binary oppositions (the secular and the sacred / the phenomenological and the mystical), Waldron’s conclusion offers another worthwhile point of departure for the debate about how Merton resolved some of the tensions between the monastic and poetic vocations in his own life and experience.

Waldron’s stylistic choices impose some limitations on his potential reading audience. His use of the first-person plural (“we”) gives the book a rather didactic tone. A more intellectually mature readership could well be frustrated by his willingness to approach complex concepts with one-line or parenthetical definitions (as is the case with “existential,” “kenosis,” and “sapiential,” for example). To these weaknesses in his approach, Waldron adds a number of peculiar end-noting issues. Certain of his definitive claims beg more careful documentation; George Woodcock and George Kilcourse

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should surely be credited with Waldron's opening statement in Chapter 5: "Critics have divided Merton's poetry into four groups: choir, desert, forest, and paradise" (71). Even if briefly, Kilcourse's careful and incisive treatment of the relationship between *kenosis* and the false self / true self transformation as it relates to Merton's poetics should be mentioned when Waldron discusses this concept. References to Carl Jung's analysis of tree images as archetypes of transformation require appropriate sourcing. On the other hand, an unpublished essay of Jonathan Montaldo's is cited when, in fact, the insights noted are readily available in their primary source (Merton's journals). In addition, other *literati*, among them T. S. Eliot, William Blake, Jacques Maritain, Aldous Huxley, and Simone Weil, are cited without their work having been given adequate discussion in terms of its influence on Merton's writing of poetry.

The chapter entitled "From Merton's Pen" provides a useful summary of the important writings. Waldron suggests that new readers of Merton start with *The Seven Storey Mountain*; he balances this with Basil Pennington's advice to begin with the five volumes of Merton's letters. Many critics familiar with Merton's large corpus of writings would not encourage either choice. The recently published *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals* must surely be at the top of the reading list for newcomers, although the journals themselves provide the most crucial and accessible insights into Merton the man, the monk, and the writer. Better advised is the reader who takes seriously Waldron's instruction that "Philosophy of Solitude" is an "essential essay for understanding Merton as poet" (37). Other connections between the writings in terms of Merton's evolving stylistics and theology would be a welcome addition to this discussion.

The theoretical framework for Waldron's approach to his choice of Merton's poetry is strongly influenced by subjective and psychological readings of the texts. Such navigations are profitable when he focuses on form and content but Waldron falls headlong into the trap of claiming to own a privileged understanding of Merton's purposes and experiences on the basis of having made a journey to the Abbey and the hermitage. He exclaims, for example, that having done so, "[he] understands more deeply [the] opening stanza of 'Elias'." His allusion to William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" has the effect of cuteness: "For Merton, much depends upon his red trailer" (84) (this in reference to the abandoned shack in which Merton ostensibly wrote the "Elias – Variations" sequence). Waldron exceeds his purpose when he states that the red trailer is a symbol of "the kind of person Merton is before God: a humble, imperfect, man" (86).

This kind of leap is often present in Waldron's analysis as he attempts to interweave the narrative of Merton's life with the particularities of the poems. Following his treatment of "Elias," he concludes that Merton's verse becomes a "confessional" wherein "he records his failures" in the hope of self-knowledge. He takes at face value Robert Lax's claim for "Night-Flowering Cactus" as Merton's "spiritual autobiography." Such a housing of the poetic voice results in a less than convincing argument by which to demonstrate Merton's power as a poet, even though Waldron has insightfully chosen Merton's essay on Louis Zukofsky as an articulation of this power: "All real valid poetry is a kind of recovery of paradise [by which] the poet . . . has found his way back to Eden" (Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays*).

Where Waldron's explication of the poems reaches its best moment for me is in his treatment of "Stranger," in the book's penultimate chapter. The meditation ensuing from this well-focused analysis bears home Waldron's aims more effectively than either that of "Elias" or "Night-Flowering Cactus." "Stranger" receives a more consistent attention to the poem's purposes and effects in terms

of their literary and contemplative value. He discusses the transitional aspects of the poem as representative of the entire collection from which it is drawn, *The Strange Islands* (1957). He then goes on to make thoughtful connections between the aesthetics of the poem and its attendant spiritual resonances. Recognizing the Zen influence on Merton's poetics at this time, Waldron explicates the speaker's pure desire to surrender to the "inward Stranger," who is "Closer and clearer / Than any wordy master"; to express his recognition that "act is waste / And suffering undone" unless one embraces the place of "eternal patience" which Waldron denotes as the "Divine will."

On this note, Waldron moves to the readers' positioning of poetry as prayer in their own lives of meditation and contemplation. His straightforward advice is followed by a helpful list of volumes of poetry which might be used for this purpose. As part of a series on poetry as prayer, including Waldron's earlier volume on Francis Thompson, this small volume, accented with drawings by Helen Kita, is one which can be given as a gift to oneself or others for those moments of silent recovery that we all seem to need in our responsibility-filled lives.