A One-Sided Venture

Review of
The Making of a Saint:
A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton
By Kenneth Bragan
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Reviewed by **Fiona Gardner**

"We are determined that we *shall* know him, in all the meticulous detail possible," writes Rowan Williams in his essay, "'A Person That Nobody Knows': A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton."[1] In Kenneth Bragan's book *The Making of a Saint*, the author, who worked as a psychiatrist, frames the determination "to know" Merton within self psychology. The theory is applied to Merton's inner world as revealed in his writings, and associated interpretations are made. Bragan, it seems, wants to know how a saint is "made," and in his psychological deconstruction seeks to bring "the saint" back to join the rest of us. The explicit aim as outlined in the introduction is to track the inner world and spiritual journey of Thomas Merton – his life. The implicit aim is to fit the inner spiritual changes as far as is possible into an understandable psychoanalytic frame. The result, for this reviewer, is muddled and unsatisfactory.

The assumption of this book, that we can understand what part psychological processes play in spiritual development, is valid and worthy of exploration. Indeed others from both a spiritual and psychological perspective have tried over the centuries to do so with varying degrees of success. There is a place for a serious book on how psychological, and in particular, psychoanalytic thinking, can contribute towards some understanding of the inner changes that take place through religious affiliation and a life of contemplative prayer, but this sadly is not it.

There are two main criticisms of the text: the first relates to the problems raised by a psychoanalytic biography where psychological constructs and theories are applied in absentia to someone's life, in this case specifically to Merton's, and where insufficient attention is paid to Merton's own writings on spiritual development; the second criticism is of the inadequate editing of the text, leading to a muddled structure with repetitions, inaccuracies and a lack of academic referencing which detracts from the seriousness of the subject and the understanding of the reader.

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In his introduction Bragan sets out his stall, summarizing the thinking and the exploration that is to follow. He briefly summarizes the theory of self psychology that he is employing (xviii) but without placing it in the context of other psychoanalytic theories. The term "selfobject" that he uses relates to *the* way that interpersonal relations, primarily in the family and especially between mother and child, become internalized. The belief is that a cohesive self is developed through the availability and responsiveness of significant others, especially the parents, and as with all psychoanalytic theory, the belief is that residues of past relationships (whether idea, fantasy or memory) affect the person in the present and their inner images (conscious and unconscious) of the self. The suggestion that this particular way of selfobject thinking about the inner life is the way to understand Merton's spiritual journey reminds me of the old saying that in analysis the Jungian patient produces Jungian dreams, the Freudian patient Freudian dreams and the Kleinian patient Kleinian dreams – in other words the analysts see and then get what they are looking for.

In the first chapter (by far the longest in the book) Bragan takes us through Merton's early years in the light of self psychology, and suggests that the development of Merton's fragile inner self was the result of early rejection by his mother when Merton's brother was born, and then abandonment through her death when Merton was still a young child. The inconsistent parenting by Merton's father and the lack of a secure home base are also noted, though Bragan weighs this alongside Merton's idealization and deep love for his father. There is little, if any, mention of the relationship with John Paul, Merton's brother. Bragan writes that in the time before becoming a monk Merton's fragmented inner world was strengthened sufficiently though friendships, especially with Robert Lax, what Bragan calls "alter-ego relationships," that provided inner supports, and it was these and the "sub-conscious identification with his father" (21) that enabled Merton to turn to God as father and find the strength to enter the monastery. Criticism of the tendency to oversimplify gender attributes has been noted in relation to another attempt to analyse Merton[2] and this also occurs in several sections in this book.

In the next chapter, Bragan raises the issue of when psychological processes are no longer sufficient to explain the spiritual changes in Merton's inner world, and how then these changes can be understood. This he describes as differentiating between self and spirit, acknowledging that this is subjective and words are usually inadequate. Bragan uses some of Merton's writings to explore how religious symbols and images may become inner presences, and their healing power is realized.

The following chapter begins with a summary of what has gone before, and then Bragan explores the feminine aspect of the divine, the link of the feminine with poetry, and how this could offer Merton further healing of past losses. He writes, "So we can imagine that Merton's 'core' self was always reaching out for 'Mother,' and could feel some uplift when touched by the feminine aspect of God but this, as yet, was only temporary in its effects" (57). Bragan's understanding is that at Merton's core lay "the deadness of his mother" (66), that this abandonment and fear of rejection had prevented Merton from "getting beyond the possessiveness of love" (68), and this theme of the search for healing of the feminine aspects is pursued in the remaining chapters. Inevitably a fair amount of weight is placed on Merton's relationship with the student nurse as

providing some form of resolution and healing, although refreshingly Bragan also highlights Merton's correspondence with Rosemary Radford Ruether as playing a significant part.

Bragan believes that Merton reached a place of healing and integration. He points to Merton's eventual integration of all aspects of being, and his demonstration of "the spiritualization of love" (122). The book ends with thoughts on what might have happened if Merton had lived longer, and then the strange final sentence, "But it also seems to me that being denied some lasting reward for his efforts was very tragic" (128). To this reviewer it rather implies that for the author the psychological will always take precedence over the spiritual, and of course the subtitle states that this is "a psychological study."

The main criticism of the book is linked to the problems raised by the psychoanalytic biography. One clear objection to the genre is that the person obviously is not present, and therefore cannot be involved in the interaction and interpretations made. In a "live" analysis there is usually mutuality between patient and analyst, and the conscious and unconscious of both are fully engaged. They affect and interact with one another so that new insights emerge for both; in other words the patient responds to the analyst's interpretations and the emphasis is on the relationship rather than any theory. In *The Making of a Saint* we have the dead Thomas Merton and the dissection of his writings and life in the light of the author's interest in self psychology. That this is a one-sided venture is evidenced by the repetition by Bragan of, for example, "I believe" (11), "That's what I think" (13) and so on – in other words the psychiatrist's voice of certainty, and the general lack of supposition especially in the first part of the book. This voice has echoes of Merton's live encounter with the psychiatrist and analyst Dr Gregory Zilboorg in 1956 which is briefly covered in the book. It is to be noted, however, that Bragan firmly disagrees with Zilboorg's diagnosis of Merton's narcissism.

Bragan explains that as he tracks Merton's spiritual journey "we will see how he [Merton] slowly got in touch with these deeper parts of his self, parts which had become split off in childhood and were painful to re-connect with. . . . [T]his allows an understanding of his struggle to know himself in a way *that nothing else can*" (xxii [emphasis added]). Bragan echoes the determination of Freud who just over a hundred years ago wrote to Jung that "The domain of biography, too, must become ours"; Freud was defending writing a pathography of Leonardo da Vinci and noted, "there is no one so great that it would be a disgrace for him to be subject to the laws that govern normal and pathological activity with equal severity."[3] In other words, even "saints" are subject to psychological laws.

The psychological perspective links with Bragan's understanding of sainthood (as in the book's title) which is that, "It is a state of being that can be achieved only when inner trauma and conflict have been sufficiently resolved to give the inner freedom to make the achievement possible" (81). This is certainly about knowing oneself in the psychological sense, but is the spiritual experience to be subsumed within the psychological? For whilst there is an acknowledged need for a rapprochement between psychotherapy and spirituality and much richness to be gained from thinking about "theology bred in the crucible of experience," there are also differences between the two areas. Interestingly Zilboorg concluded from his analysis of psychoanalytic and

psychological studies of religious experience that: "While psychology can throw a great deal of light on religious experiences and religious faith may enrich one's psychological functioning, psychology as a scientific discipline can shed no light whatsoever on the relations between God and man."[4] That Bragan seems never really to understand this is illustrated in a number of places, and I will highlight two examples. The first is the discussion of Merton's statement in *The Sign of Jonas*: "In order to be not remembered or even wanted I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis – he's half dead too."[5] Bragan's comments on this are of Merton's "severe depression" and "the confusion, ambivalence, and unreality of this writing . . . the staccato and clumsy style, in such a contrast to the fluency he employed when he was feeling confident" (69). According to Bragan, Merton is under stress. Contrast this with Rowan Williams' view of this same passage as "climacteric" revealing a deep awareness of the illusory nature of both the definition of the self offered by society and the definition of the self practicing religious observances within the monastic community: "The true solitude in which the monk must face his nothingness is to be found, finally, only in the monk himself" (Williams 28-29).

A second example is where Bragan phrases Merton's developing experience of Jesus Christ as, "In psychological terms, Christ is a spiritualized 'selfobject' created out of contemplative dwelling on the man Jesus on the Cross" (106). The presence of Christ was real for Merton, but Bragan ponders about what this can mean. He quotes Merton here who writes of Christ "present in the depths of our being as a friend and our other self." Exploring the idea of the imagination made objective as part of divine activity Bragan admits, "I am struggling here for a psychological understanding of the process by which the man Jesus eventually became, for Merton, the Christ, which I have no doubt is what he experienced and believed" (107).

The second criticism of the actual text is that there are clear benefits in having a book professionally edited: avoidance of repetition, accuracy about facts, and ideas on layout, references and so on. These aspects all needed to be addressed in this self-published book. There is frequent repetition of the areas already covered, and whilst understanding the author's desire for the reader to keep up it can also be an irritation. There are a number of factual inaccuracies and the following stand out: Merton's mother died when he was six, not five; he was in the monastery for 27 years not 26; it is Rosemary Radford Ruether not Rosemary Reuther; and the Abbey of Gethsemani is not spelled Gethsemane. A major weakness of the book is the lack of references in the text and there is no coherent bibliography. Some books consulted are mentioned in the acknowledgements, but anyone wanting to check any of the quotations or indeed know more about self psychology would be at a loss (for information the self psychology theories are proposed by Heinz Kohut and based on his work *The Analysis of the Self* [1971]).

For this reader the main interest of the book lay in the general exploration about where psychological and spiritual processes overlap and are different – not just for Merton, as this has to be supposition – but for those of us practicing contemplation and aware of transformations in the inner world. The fields of psychoanalysis and spirituality have often ignored one another, to the detriment of both, although some spiritual writers have understood psychological processes

well and Bragan quotes Fénelon and Feuerbach on this (without references). Thankfully Bragan is open in his belief that psychological understanding can take us only so far, and that divine activity is better understood through experience, faith and its fruits.

However I would like finally to comment on how theory can kill off the spirit of Merton, a warning that all of us interested in "knowing" Merton are to be wary of. Edward F. Mooney, writing about Kierkegaard's work *Repetition*, highlights the contrast between theory and lived experience. For Kierkegaard, and for Merton too, human fulfillment does not rest on intellectual understanding. Restoration is to a world of sustaining value, an "enigmatic value-saturated world" that far exceeds any "muffled thoughts or passing theory" about the ground or source of what has been bequeathed. Mooney includes this quotation:

> at the very moment in which we "arm" ourselves with a cognitive model we are paradoxically, justified in losing interest in the object. We no longer consider it as enigmatic since it is our turn to speak. . . . It is almost as though a dense cloud of theory, interpretation, and explanation formed around the object, blunting its prospective eloquence.[6]

1. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 17; subsequent references will be cited as "Williams" parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Sheridan, "Psyching Out Merton," review of *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* by Robert Waldron, *The Merton Seasonal* 36.3 (Fall 2011) 26-33.
3. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London: J. M. Dent, 1988) 269.
4. Gregory Zilboorg, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967) 149.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 253.
6. Gemma Corradi Fuimara in *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 106-107, quoted by Edward F. Mooney in Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 282-307.