

Parallel Doors to the Cosmos

Review of

Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry

By Thomas Merton [7 CDs]

Introduction by Michael W. Higgins

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Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

Some years ago a friend suggested to me that Thomas Merton should have stayed in academia rather than entering the monastic life. Listening to these Sunday afternoon talks given in 1964-65 by Merton to the novices and others in formation at the Abbey of Gethsemani, one might be tempted to agree. He does, though, say in passing in a talk on lyric poetry that he is glad that he doesn't have to do that sort of lecturing for a living. Nevertheless, the talks are addressed to people coming from very different backgrounds than his own, as can be felt in the way he put questions to his audience. While the questions are nominally part of a Socratic teaching technique, it is clear that Merton didn't expect much in reply that might enlarge his own understanding of the similarity between art and religion, which is essentially what these talks are about. Moreover, although there is not a great deal in these talks that Merton had not already covered in his writings, nevertheless it is good to hear his voice and especially to enjoy his humor. Overall, he seemed to like these sessions and felt that in talking about poetry he had something important to say to them as monks. In part, this is because the Bible, Merton repeatedly points out, is largely poetry.

The *talks* – since this word is more appropriate than the word *lectures* in conveying the informality of Merton's approach – are often freely arranged and illustrated with textual explications drawn from passages that Merton carried with him into these sessions. The authors whose works Merton explicated were favorites, including William Blake, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Herbert, Simone Weil, W. H. Auden and Edwin Muir. (Oddly enough, there is little included in this series of talks about T. S. Eliot.) Michael Higgins' introduction to this series of talks is very helpful in bringing out the crucial formative influence of Blake and the profound similarities between Merton and Blake. Due to the informality of the talks they tend to be discursive, and occasionally the editors mislead the reader regarding the contents of a particular talk. This is the case, it would seem, with "Liturgy and Poetry," which is actually a continuation of the preceding talk on "Literal vs. Symbolic." On the whole this is of

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minor consequence for the listener, who can settle back and listen to Merton ranging over wide fields of thought and discourse. The clarity of the sound on these CDs, incidentally, is excellent.

Rather than taking one through the talks one by one, which listeners can easily do on their own, it might be more useful to touch on some of Merton's major themes in them. The reason, he asserts repeatedly, those in the monastic life need to know something about art, including literature, is because art shares a great deal with the monastic and particularly with the contemplative life. Serious and significant artists, even those with no formal religious beliefs, Merton maintains, tend to include spiritual and often metaphysical dimensions in their work whether or not these are identified as such. Thus, Merton saw art and religion as parallel doors to the cosmos, to ultimate reality and to God, the master artist. At the same time he cautioned against favoring poetry simply because it was produced by a religious believer. Merton decried much of the formal religious poetry in the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that such work often attracted praise when it was poorly constructed, shallow and sentimental.

In these talks on poetry and religion Merton emphasized the importance of nature for poets and for those in the contemplative life. Without being pantheistic, he saw the relationship between nature and human beings as stemming from their shared status as creatures of God. In this respect Merton is not necessarily ingenuous in his view of nature and he looks to Blake, for example, to provide an eschatological view of nature that addresses its predatory aspects. In Blake Merton saw nature as reflecting the creative act of God. Such is the import of Blake's tiger, a symbol of a desired, transformational vision of being.

Many of these talks dwell on the importance of symbol as the language of poetry. Symbols communicate meaning that arises from the reader's experience with the creatures that constitute the symbols chosen. As suggestive images, symbols contrast with explanatory, abstract language, and have an experiential wholeness that engages the reader's senses, emotions and insight. Groups of symbols within a particular work lead the reader to relate the range of meanings associated with each symbol to other symbols in their midst and thus to piece together the meaning of the whole. Typically, Merton points out, this is an incomplete process that leaves some matters unexplained, a mystery left to be fathomed. In this way art has something in common with theology, he observes, in their mutual evocation of the ultimate mysteriousness of being.

A focus in these talks has to do with Merton's view of the nature of poetry in contrast to prose. Merton tends to link prose with the abstract – with rationality and argument – whereas poetry he sees as characteristically involving intuitive and holistic understanding. In this respect he identifies with the Romantic tradition rather than with Neo-Classicism. Romanticism he describes as focusing on the experience of the individual and he was especially impressed with Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." In this respect Romantic poetry fits easily into the life of contemplation. Thus, a poem might center on religious belief but as art is not about dogma but rather about the experience of the believer in silent meditation with his or her Creator. Here, Merton refers to the Anglican poets of the seventeenth century, especially George Herbert, in their capturing of the consciousness of the ardent believer and of the longing of those caught farther from God than they can tolerate. In rendering this theme, Merton makes excellent illustrative use of Blake's famous poem "Ah, Sun-Flower." In this poem the narrator feels the presence of God, Merton states, not primarily as a source of belief, but as an *experience* in which the soul turns towards God in a longed-for unity.

In considering poetry, Merton, more than any other twentieth-century poet who comes to mind, emphasized the importance of silence in poetry, and he does so in these talks. He thought of the silence

built into the structure of a poem, for example, as reflecting a kind of restraint exercised by the artist. The poet, using line-breaks, rhythms and symbols, leaves gaps or silences between the images in the poem where the reader can pause and take in the significance of what he or she is reading and experiencing. The reader is drawn to follow the trail of the poem's gathering themes until the significance of the whole is apprehended. In this way the reader is led to the margins of the poem's frontiers of meaning. Finally, the reader is carried aloft to the deepest areas of human questioning and thus inevitably to God.