

An Anthology for Praying

Review of

The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Vision

Edited and compiled by John Moses

Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2018

xxv + 162 pp. / \$15.99 paper

Reviewed by **Sarah Kothe**

In an essay on “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” Paul Griffiths discusses three methods of reading – academic, Proustian and Victorine (*The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* [Eerdmans, 2001] 32-47). Griffiths’s choice in labels may be a bit arcane, but his descriptions of each mode of reading will be clear to every reader. Academic reading, the most common form of serious reading, is concerned primarily with “technical mastery” and the “consumption of knowledge.” In this form of reading, the relationship between reader and text is one-dimensional; the reader, as agent, extracts relevant information from a text that has no reciprocal moral claim on them. In contrast to this unidirectional relationship between reader and text, both “Proustian” and “Victorine” readers allow a book to shape them. The Proustian reader (so-called after French novelist Marcel Proust) looks to a text to elicit an emotional or aesthetic response, while the Victorine reader (the mode Griffiths hopes to endear to Christian readers, called after the medieval school of St. Victor in Paris) encapsulates both academic and Proustian reading, yet also moves beyond them. A Victorine reader may examine a text with analytic tools or enjoy a piece of poetry for its ability to evoke emotions, but underlying and grounding each text the Victorine reader attends to is a recognition that reading can be a pathway to deepen one’s relationship to God. This type of reading corresponds to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, a daily staple of Thomas Merton’s life, whereby a text is savored and allowed to speak directly to the reader’s heart.

As a recent graduate of a master’s program, I turned to John Moses’s new book, *The Art of Thomas Merton: A Divine Passion in Word and Vision*, with the eyes of an academic reader, expecting to extract information about Merton’s role as an artist. Moses’s book, however, is not a scholarly survey or critique of Merton’s artistic output, but a beautifully curated collection of Merton’s writing and art that lends itself to slow, meditative reading. Moses, an Anglican priest and Merton scholar, himself notes in the preface to this anthology that the reader of the book “should proceed slowly” (xxi), dwelling on certain quotations or images and even reading certain passages aloud, so as to allow Merton’s words to resonate in one’s own life. *The Art of Thomas Merton* is an anthology fit for those who are interested in reading Merton in a prayerful mode akin to *lectio divina* – or the aforementioned Victorine reading.

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The anthology is organized into six sections (“Encountering God,” “Living the Gospel,” “Learning to Pray,” “Embracing the World,” “The Church Looking beyond Itself,” and “On Being in Christ”) that speak to the primary concerns of Merton’s life. Moses begins each of the major sections with a few brief yet insightful pages of reflection on the topic to follow. Interspersing biographical information with an ability to crystalize Merton’s thinking, these introductory sections offer the new Merton reader an almost chronological journey through Merton’s life and thought. Within each major section are further subdivisions which are distracting at times, but would be helpful for finding quotations that speak to the specific needs of the reader.

Merton-lovers and newcomers alike will find that on every page of the anthology there are words that speak to them. It is apparent that Moses is a dedicated and widely-read Merton scholar from the careful selection of writings he has compiled. Many of Merton’s “greatest hits” are present in the anthology, including his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut (105), as well as his famous prayer that begins “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going” (27), yet Moses also includes plenty of lesser-known gems from Merton’s journals, poetry, letters and books that sparkle with insight (see the source list: 143-45).

Accompanying the selected quotations are twenty-eight images of Merton’s artwork. Although, as Moses notes in the preface, words were Merton’s “stock-in-trade, his first and most characteristic art form” (xvii), Merton’s constant creative drive propelled him to take up new modes of self-expression, including photography, calligraphy and printmaking. Gracing the pages of *The Art of Thomas Merton* are some of Merton’s calligraphies and prints. Just as Moses encourages the meditative reading of Merton’s words, he also encourages the reader to take on the practice of *visio divina*: lingering on each of Merton’s abstract creations and allowing these “signs and ciphers of energy” and “strange blobs of ink,” as Merton described his artwork (xx), to surprise and awaken the viewer to new insights. While the addition of Merton’s artwork incorporates a unique and valuable visual element to this anthology, one might wish that the reproductions were larger so the viewer could immerse themselves more fully in the images.

Within the pages of *The Art of Thomas Merton*, the reader will be able to encounter the various “faces” of Thomas Merton – as monk, artist, poet, social critic, nature-lover, mystic and seeker. Yet the face of Merton that stands out in this collection is Merton as spiritual director, guiding us into the “Divine Passion” of “God’s search for us and our search for God” (xxi). The reader who spends time with these words, reading deeply, reading not in an academic but in a Victorine manner that seeks God on every page, will find that this book achieves the aims set out for it by its author – to enable the reader “to respond more fully to the Gospel invitation to enter into life” and deepen our passion for God (xxi).