

MELITA THEOLOGICA
Journal of the Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
65/2 (2015): 113-114

Book Review:

Patrick F. O’Connell (ed.),
Thomas Merton: Selected Essays

(New York: Orbis, 2013), 493 pp.,

ISBN 978-1-62698-023-5

Readers in whose hands this book ends up can consider themselves privileged to have such a true spiritual gem in their possession. This is a collection of thirty-three essays penned by the American Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton (1915–1968), published in advance of the one hundredth anniversary of his birth in 2015. This work, edited and introduced by Patrick F. O’Connell, professor in the Department of English and Theology at Gannon University, Erie, Pennsylvania, emerges as a comprehensive anthology complementary to *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* which he co-authored and which was published in 2006. Upon reading the book, one will realize how daunting it was for the editor to grasp and present Merton’s impressive intellectual and spiritual depth in just a little less than 500 pages.

The success of this remarkable collection depends on one main point. The focus is on seeing and encountering Merton as an essayist. In his introduction to the book, O’Connell, who was a founder member and former president of the International Thomas Merton Society, portrays Merton’s “career” as an essayist, divided into two approximately equal periods, 1947-58 and 1958-68. O’Connell’s careful selection of the texts reveals a Merton who prefers to ask questions rather than to present prefabricated conclusions. The reader will learn how Merton made every effort to converge the contemplative life with the Christian or rather the mystic’s engagement in the world. This does, in fact, become his trait, particularly when considering all sides of a question and going beyond the usual “religious” and “monastic” milieu.

O'Connell effectively leads his readers to approach Merton in the light of the mystic's literary transition, rather than envisioning him through one's own likes or particular interests. The editor explains that while Merton's later essays are by far more important, his early writings reveal his penchant for essay-writing manifesting equally an open soul characterized by its intellectual rigour. Some of the main themes of these Merton essays include his ongoing conversion from baptism through entry into monastic life to his priestly ordination; contemplation as "the very fullness of a fully integrated life"; rather than "a separate department of life", peace as a religious responsibility; violence and nonviolence; respect for otherness; religion and race; monasticism and the Oriental Wisdom; the contemplative life in the modern world; the Desert Tradition; as well as the humanity of Christ in monastic prayer.

Anyone reading this volume will simply enjoy it and will eventually be drawn to Merton's poetic skills, symbolism and literary craftsmanship. This is even more evident in the titles that he gives to his essays. These include: "White Pebble" (p. 3-14); "Boris Pasternak and the People with Watch Chains" (p. 39-51); "The Recovery of Paradise" (p. 52-64); "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" (p. 65-85); "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra concerning Giants" (p. 113-125); "Message to Poets" (172-176); "A Tribute to Gandhi" (p. 177-184); "From Pilgrimage to Crusade" (p. 185-204); "Rain and Rhinoceros" (p. 216-224); "Day of a Stranger" (p. 232-239); "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism" (p. 258-276); "The Time of the End is the Time of No Room" (p. 277-283); "A Christian looks at Zen" (p. 342-360); "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner" (p. 401-425); "Ishi: A Meditation" (p. 426-432); "Learning to Live" (p. 433-441); "The Wild Places" (p. 442-451); "Final Integration: 'Towards a Monastic Therapy'" (p. 452-462), amongst others.

O'Connell's book becomes even more useful for its appendix (p. 463-477) on *Merton's Essays: A Chronology* from 1938-2012, and for its bibliography (p. 478-480). An index can be found on pages 481-492. One possible criticism to this book is the very selection of the texts. Some others could have been inserted in this volume. Nevertheless, as the editor is aware of Merton's own insistence that by no means are all of a mystic's essays of the same quality or significance, apart from O'Connell's own criteria on what to include in this work, readers are still enriched by this useful compendium that helps them wade in the ocean of one of the greatest spiritual writers of the twentieth century.

John Anthony Berry
 Department of Fundamental and Dogmatic Theology,
 Faculty of Theology,
 University of Malta,
 Msida MSD 2080, Malta

john.berry@um.edu.mt