

MONK: ART AND THE SOUL. AN IMAGINARIUM edited by Sophie Lévy Burton, MONK, Lambourn, UK, 2020, pp.176, £15.00, pbk

Something new is happening in the borderlands of art, metaphysics, and theology. *Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by George Corbett (Cambridge: Open Book, 2019), combines both theological text and recordings of real, newly commissioned music. In my review in *New Blackfriars* (May 2021), I compared it with the fifteenth-century Nicholas of Cusa's multimedia work *The Vision of God*, in which he combined an image, a performance attached to the image, and a theological treatise. Sophie Lévy Burton's unique anthology, *MONK*, takes this a step further: arts and text combine in creative tension, a Cusan coincidence of opposites.

MONK looks like – and is – a beautifully produced high-end magazine, a work of art in its own right. The front cover promises painting, fiction, poetry, interviews, and essays. But – and this is where the vertigo of the coincidence of opposites begins – it is no coffee-table book for thinking people. The interviews and essays, in particular, are challenging and intellectually gritty. David Somerville's art may be colourfully exuberant, just what we might expect from a studio in the arty London quarter of Shoreditch, yet his interview reveals a poignant metaphysical tension. Marie-Elsa Bragg, combining the work both of poet and pastor, is drawn to and inspired by nature, yet not because nature gives instant comfort. Rather, because nature is a teacher of waiting, living with our not knowing. Rowan Williams is there too, speaking on some of his favourite subjects, such as liturgical language, but also with an ascetic insistence that to write poetry is not just to express oneself, but rather to enter into something that takes us beyond and reveals a second self. Anna Zaranko's short story 'Hats Over the Tiber' is an exquisite piece of writing, and for that all the more powerful in leaving us with awkward questions about the limits of words in liturgy, questions of reform and the place of the senses in the sacred unsayable. Rachel Kelly's candid account of healing from severe depression through poetry reflects precisely on the sparseness of poetry, the 'slivers' of words which were all she could take at the time. Mark Cazalet is surely, a reassuringly and uncomplicatedly Christian artist, whose contemporary but solidly figurative work graces English cathedrals? So he presents us with work inspired by Buddhist gardens, and reflects on how this has deepened his understanding of God's presence in the making art – not in the paint but in the mix, *and* beyond it. And the artist, Cazalet insists, is not there just for him or herself, but has a responsibility to others, because his or her paintings are painted to be seen. The final interview is with Francis Pott, a composer - who is agnostic, not without regret - of fine church music, who

will have no truck with easy ‘spiritual’ music that just leaves you with a nice glow.

But nor does *MONK* simply plunge us into an abyss of unknowing before a stern ethic of artistic responsibility made all the harder by the stripping away of easy comforts and certainties. Just as the text challenges us not just to indulge ourselves with a superficial gaze on the art or a skim-read of the poetry and stories, so the art reassures that, in the honesty of argument and the limits of words, there *are* the good, the true and the beautiful. And in a time when contemporary art can be reproached with making work which is not so much ugly but despairing, Sophie Lévy Burton has discovered works of art that are uplifting and approachable without being simplistic, and beautiful without being pastiche. There is a sense of going away with more than you had before, yet in a way that both challenges and supports a deeper questioning. Together the apophatic and cataphatic gently push the beholder, not without playfulness, into a beyond which is indefinable *and* towards which we can gesture.

The *MONK* anthology itself came out of an uncomfortable place, namely, lockdown. Prior to this, *MONK* had been an online magazine which had arisen from the conversations Lévy Burton – herself a sculptor – had had with artists. ‘There was always this clear pull in the conversation – the meeting points between the mysterious experience of making art and the experience of their spiritual self – that elusive sense of bringing something from beyond and the nature of inspiration’, she writes. *MONK* was an ‘inner space online’ – but lockdown changed all that. Precisely at the moment when everything went virtual, Lévy Burton felt the pull to manifest *MONK* physically, in this anthology. The coincidence of opposites again.

In an age of unbelief, in the apparent triumph of scientific materialism, Christian philosophers and theologians are right to reject all intellectual sloppiness, especially in the realm of metaphysics. The creative explosion of ‘spirituality’ in the New Age of the 1960s displayed incoherence in every respect, and because of this could not be expected to last, let alone develop philosophically or theologically. Yet there is the opposite danger that, in the quest for coherence and certainty, Christian philosophers will exclude vast swathes of human experience, of places where people continue to draw meaning and strength – such as the arts. In our desire to be scientifically solid, we may unintentionally have withdrawn into the mind.

In embracing art as a site of metaphysical investigation, Lévy Burton not only recalls the medieval sense of the unity and interconnectedness of the different branches of human *scientia*, but also engages in a gentle intellectual decolonisation. Mbizo Chirasha, a Zimbabwean writer, reflects on nature, war, and indigenous spirituality, while Judith Nangala Crispin resists the temptation to cultural appropriation of aboriginal Australian dreamtime precisely in her acceptance of the hospitality of a people who told her that being aboriginally Australian is a choice. Could a fruit of

MONK be a global dialogue towards the renewal of metaphysics? Art is always unpredictable.

DOMINIC WHITE OP
Blackfriars, Cambridge

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MORAL ACTION IN THOMAS AQUINAS by Jack Mahoney SJ, *Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, Lanham, 2021, pp. vii + 186, £73.00, hbk*

Jack Mahoney opens this engaging and illuminating work with a clear statement of intent. His book begins:

This study was born of a wish to know what so great a theologian as St. Thomas Aquinas thought of the role of the Holy Spirit of God in the process of human action. The result strikingly more than satisfied the author's expectation, in making it abundantly clear that Thomas' entire moral theology, or his theological ethics is pervaded by the presence or dynamic activity of the Holy Spirit, as this work is now intended to show (p. 1).

What follows is elegantly written, carefully researched, and tightly argued. According to Mahoney, Aquinas sees an 'affinity' between the internal relations of the Trinity and the external missions in the economy. On this basis Mahoney shows how Aquinas 'appropriated' created effects to the Spirit through an analysis of biblical images such as wind, fire, water, and oil. A picture emerges of the Spirit as a recreating principle of life who both leads us to Christ and drives us out on mission.

A key text in this dynamic presentation is *Romans* 8: 14: '*for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*'. Aquinas, according to Mahoney, understands the children of God to be not just led but 'driven' by the Spirit. The Spirit provides an impetus to human action that is not external but internal to the subject. Here Mahoney argues forcefully against translating Aquinas's '*instinctus*' as 'instinct', preferring instead 'instigation'. The action of the spiritual person is instigated by the Spirit. Mahoney excludes any sense that this 'instigation' might replace or coerce the free choice of the subject. Instead, Mahoney attempts to capture the idea that for Aquinas the grace of the Holy Spirit elevates the powers of the soul by establishing a proportionality between the mover and the moved. An animal is governed by its instincts, but the children of God are inclined to act in such a way that we freely choose to obey God's will.

This conclusion leads Mahoney into an analysis of Aquinas's teaching on the New Law. This New Law, for Aquinas, is the grace of the Holy Spirit. Predominantly, then, the New Law is unwritten. Nevertheless, in