

A Review Symposium

Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation.
 Vol. I of the Journals of Thomas Merton
 Edited by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.
 HarperSanFrancisco, 1995
 xvii + 478 pages, with index

Participants:
 Patrick O'Connell
 William H. Shannon
 David A. King

I

Patrick O'Connell

On April 18, 1941, back in New York after his Holy Week retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton reflected on the disorientation he felt in moving from monastic quiet to urban bustle:

There is a huge gap between the monastery and the world, and Louisville is a nice enough town but I wasn't happy to be thrown back into it. . . . There had been a big robbery on Fourth St., Louisville. . . . The sign "Clown Cigarettes," on, I think, Walnut Street, made me laugh wanly. There was a lot of sun. I didn't want to see any of the city, or any of the people.

The startling contrast between this entry and the much more famous "Fourth and Walnut" passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), in which Merton talks of being "suddenly overwhelmed" by an awareness of his love for all the people passing by, in whom he recognized the divine image shining "like a pure diamond," might tempt

the reader to conclude that these radically divergent responses at the same location epitomize a "huge gap" between a younger, world-denying Merton and the mature monk who was deeply engaged by the joys and the problems of all humanity.

While there can be no question of the remarkable spiritual development Merton experienced between April 1941 and March 1958, when he would again stand on this corner, a careful reading of *Run to the Mountain*, the first volume of Merton's complete journals, in which this entry appears (356), reveals that too stark a dichotomy between early and later Merton would be a considerable oversimplification. A good part of the new book's fascination is provided by the discovery of seeds and early growth of many of the concerns and convictions that characterize the better-known writings of Merton's later life. If he is disillusioned by the trivialities of everyday life after the transcendent experience of Easter at the monastery, he will later recognize Harlem as well as Gethsemani as "stables of Bethlehem where Christ is born among the outcast and the poor" (464). If he is skeptical of the agenda of a "Left wing" priest he meets in Washington, and other "half-baked liberals" (100-1), he is deeply inspired by the Gospel witness to the poor shown by Catherine de Hueck (382) and Léon Bloy (386). If he writes that the bombing of London "for the first time, made me want to fight" (245), he soon filed for noncombatant conscientious objector status "so as not to have to kill men made in the image of God" (316) and wrote passages on the inhumanity of war, on bombing of civilians and production of "humane" poison gas (264, 413), that, as Michael Mott has noted, could be inserted into *Conjectures* without changing a word. Though the pre-monastic journals sometimes express a recent convert's overly romanticized view of the Church and overly judgmental view of secular society, they also document both Merton's profound interest in and curiosity about the people and scenes and events he observes, and the seriousness and intensity of this early phase of his quest for God and for his own identity and vocation in God.

These journals cover the period from May 2, 1939, when Merton was living on Perry Street in New York's Greenwich Village, less than six months after being baptized a Catholic and ten weeks after receiving his master's degree in English from Columbia, through December 5, 1941, five days before leaving St. Bonaventure College for the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani. During this time of slightly more than two and a half years, Merton made plans to become a Franciscan

priest, taught night classes in Columbia's Extension School, visited Cuba, spent two summers writing novels with his friends at an Olean, New York, cottage, was turned down by the Franciscans, taught English for three semesters (and a summer) at St. Bonaventure, and decided to enter the Cistercians. He also read much, thought much, talked much, drank much, laughed much, wrote much, prayed much, and attempted to make sense of his own life in the midst of a world which itself made less and less sense as it plunged into another war. While this is a period already well known from other writings by and about Merton, this volume provides a sense of concrete immediacy, and an abundance and richness of detail, not available in the retrospective account of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, nor in the much abbreviated version of the same material in *The Secular Journal*, nor in the quotation and interpretation of journal passages by Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (though a comparison of the complete text with Mott's excerpts confirms the judiciousness with which he made his selection).

These pages record Merton's enthusiasms and his struggles, his firm commitment to the faith he had embraced and his restless uncertainty about where that faith was or should be leading, which gradually and then insistently gives way to the conviction that he belongs at Gethsemani. Not without its own omissions and reticences that must be supplemented from other sources, *Run to the Mountain* is clearly an indispensable document for encountering and understanding Merton during this momentous time of transition.

Perhaps the predominant initial impression created by these journals is one of sheer variety, the continually shifting focus of Merton's observations and reflections on people, books, places, ideas, projects, plans, personal and world events, which may receive passing or more developed comment, appreciative or critical. Nowhere else, for example, do we get so vivid an impression of the breadth of Merton's reading, both secular and sacred. Not only James Joyce, in general, and *Finnegan's Wake*, in particular, but William Saroyan and Aldous Huxley and Graham Greene, Wordsworth and Dylan Thomas, Valery Larbaud and Guillaume Apollinaire and Léon Bloy (in the original French), Dante (in Italian), Federico García Lorca (in Spanish), even Damon Runyon, among others, attract his attention and interest. His love of superlatives testifies to his enthusiasms, as when he calls *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "one of the best books in the world," only to add a few lines later that the biblical Book of Tobias is "even

better" (243), or when he calls Lorca "easily the best religious poet of this century." Though he immediately appends the rueful comments—"I wish I could stop trying to make judgments—'best in the century' etc.," and "Never got over the sin of editing a college yearbook" (106)—this is a habit that will stay with him throughout his life, as new discoveries are elevated, at least for a time, to the status of "the best."

The focus of Merton's reading is noticeably more theological (though by no means exclusively so) after his arrival at St. Bonaventure, with extensive quotations from Kierkegaard, Anselm's *Proslogion*, Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* (as well as from his *De Septem Donis Spiritus Sancti*, inexplicably omitted from the present edition), and Gilson's study of Bonaventure, some of which, at least, reflects his studies with Fr. Philotheus Boehner (who will, of course, be a key figure in Merton's decision to seek admission to Gethsemani). *The Secular Journal* provides some excerpts from Merton's Holy Week meditations on self-knowledge, prefiguring later reflections on identity in *Seeds of Contemplation* and elsewhere, but only here are we made aware that these are part of a commentary based on a careful reading of the *De Diligendo Deo* of St. Bernard (misidentified as St. Benedict by Mott). There is a similar though less extensive use of the third book of *The Imitation of Christ* during the Labor Day 1941 retreat at Our Lady of the Valley Abbey, which also prompts reflections in which we may already detect accents that will characterize the later Merton:

What we are—our identity—is only truly known to God—not to ourselves, not to other men. . . . The measure of our identity, of our being (the two are the same) is the amount of our love for God. The more we love earthly things, reputation, importance, pleasures, ease, and success, the less we love God. Our identity is dissipated among things that have no value, and we are drowned and *die* in trying to live in the material things we would like to possess, or in the projects we would like to complete to objectify the work of our own wills. Then, when we come to die, we find we have squandered all our love (that is, our being) on things of nothingness, and that we are nothing, we are death. . . . But tribulation detaches us from the things of nothingness in which we spend ourselves and die. Therefore tribulation gives us life, and we love it, not out of love for death, but love for life. . . . My life is measured by my love of God, and that in turn is measured by my love for the least of His children: and that love is not an abstract benevolence: it must mean sharing their tribulation (398–9).

Clearly words such as these, based on reading of original sources (in the original language), already signal that this is not the usual convert, not the average Catholic.

More typical of the journals than such extended meditative passages, and perhaps equally revealing, are series of briefer comments on an extraordinary range of facts and incidents that come under Merton's observation, with an equivalently wide variation of tone, in turn sardonic, ironic, humorous, exuberant, serious, passionate. For instance, in a single entry (November 12, 1940), loosely focused on the topic of violence, he moves from speculation that Hitler would fall down stairs or die from some inconsequential cause like the mumps, to a remark about one of his students, who "knocked out a freshman and then fell into a hedge and got a thorn so deep in his hand the doctor couldn't cut it out," to his assigning his class the task of modernizing a passage of Chaucer, which "will probably . . . do violence to their tempers," to Father Hubert's anger at the *New Yorker* for being anti-Catholic, while Merton himself is "mad at it for being anti-funny, and extremely dull," to human entrails as the only "meat" pigs will eat, to the decision not to hold the Bonaventure junior prom in Bradford, Pennsylvania, because no one could negotiate the twenty-mile return trip without "cracking up against a tree somewhere." After these comments and various other asides (such as mention of an invitation from Jinny Burton to spend Christmas in "Richmond, that drunken city"), he concludes, "This is a violent world, in which I am not doing nearly enough work, although I appear to be busy all the time" (255). Though there is nothing particularly profound in these comments or significant in the events that prompted them, the many entries of this sort typify the alert, inquisitive, often amused or bemused state of Merton's mind when it is "off duty," not struggling with any crises or major social or political or religious issues, yet not unmindful of serious implications not too far beneath the surface of even the trifling details of everyday existence.

In Merton's penchant for making lists there is an almost Whitmanesque conviction that virtually anything is at least potentially significant. His fascination with language is evident in the long catalogue of up-to-date terms (74-5) or "*Words culled like flowers from a page of George Eliot*" (364-5) or the roster of French adjectives for place names (23-4) or Spanish words taken from Lorca (104-5) or, in another vein, the fifty-five items in his list of "snatches of songs and jingles and stupid catches" (76-82) or on a somewhat higher level, "snatches of

verse I can remember" (258-9). (Footnotes identifying the passages would have been helpful here and in similar places elsewhere in the volume.) He enumerates such mock-serious categories as "*Merton's political memories*," including seeing the Chancellor of the Exchequer and President Roosevelt's mother (38-9), and "Modern Ceremonies" (e.g., the draft, opening the subway, pep rallies, etc.) (254-55), and even "Things I like about the story of Rudolf Hess' flight from Germany" (372). The lists can be of externals, like "List of Things in Boston" (259-61), or subjective, like things "I lately saw in my mind's eye or in a dream" (290-1) or the twenty-nine "Illuminating thoughts I have had lately" (312-4). Much of this, of course, is trivia, as Merton is well aware, and often list-making is part of an exercise in taking neither himself nor what he will later call "pseudo-events" too seriously. On June 28, 1940, he writes, "What (besides making lists of the vices of our age) are some of the greatest vices of our age?" (233). Occasionally, as with the May 14, 1941, synopsis of twenty-one regretted arguments (366-8), such lists do serve a purpose of self-examination (and provide nuggets of biographical information not otherwise available), but mainly they suggest the teeming abundance of phenomena that attracted and held Merton's attention and provide a rough analogue of the complex storage and retrieval system that must have been incessantly in operation in his mind.

But *Run to the Mountain* does not consist only, or mainly, in an accumulation of diverse and eclectic data, nor does it give the impression of a diffused, unfocused consciousness. The volume is aptly subtitled "The Story of a Vocation," though the reader might initially wonder if "A Tale of Two Vocations" would have been more evocative and more accurate. While the attraction to religious life grows in significance as the months pass, the intense desire to be a writer is evident from the very first page, when Merton mentions giving a talk on poetry at the Columbia Writers Club (3-4). While comments on his various writing projects are often brief, they are persistent. He summarizes his time on Perry Street with the words, "Most of the time wrote and wrote" (220), and despite his teaching duties, a similar statement would apply to his time at St. Bonaventure (and even more to the summers at the cottage, though apparently novel-writing left little time for journal-keeping, since these periods are the most sparsely documented in the volume). At least four novels, many poems, even abortive attempts to write short stories are mentioned in these pages. We are privy to Merton's disappointment at numerous rejection slips, to his dissatisfaction

with past work and hopes for current projects. He records the use of "Joyce doubletalk" (149) in the early, lost "pastoral" of 1939–40, an influence that will reappear in the last of the pre-monastic novels, "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis" from the spring and summer of 1941. The example of Joyce is also evident in Merton's own predilection for autobiography, both factual and fictional; he is already quite aware of his own limitations and strengths as a writer:

I have tremendous preoccupations of my own, personal preoccupations with whatever is going on inside my own heart, and I simply can't write about anything else. . . . I try to create some new, objective, separate person outside myself and it doesn't work. I make some stupid wooden guy. Give me a chance to write about the things I remember, things that are in one way or another piled up inside me and it is absolutely different. There are a whole lot of rich and fabulous and bright things in that store (118; see also 20–1, 37, 91, 138–9).

Given this focus, it is not surprising that the most frequent discussions of writing in the journals concern the journals themselves, a sort of running commentary on his running commentary. Though he declares at one point, "I am not going to try to justify what I am writing here" (133), he does return repeatedly to the subject of journals and their purpose, or rather the purpose of his own journals in particular. While early in the Perry Street Journal he insists that "this stuff is not written for anybody to read, yet it is practice and it is helpful and good, so long as I do not think of it in terms of its being published and read, and so a source of pride" (35), by the end of 1940 he has admitted that the journal is indeed

written for publication. It is about time I realized that, and wrote it with some art. . . . If a journal is written for publication, then you can tear pages out of it, emend it, correct it, write with art. If it is a personal document, every emendation amounts to a crisis of conscience and a confession, not an artistic correction (271–2).

Yet a continued ambivalence is evident in the fact that he actually was keeping two versions of journal during much of 1940–41, one typewritten and more public, "the one I don't mind if people read over my shoulder in the subway," the other handwritten and "more private, more nondescript, and more religious—more personal, I guess" (375). (Most of the typewritten entries for the so-called "Brown Journal" of

this period duplicate, in revised form, the handwritten entries; the handful of typewritten entries that do not correspond to passages in the handwritten journal are not included in the original edition of *Run to the Mountain*, but are published in an appendix to the paperback version.) This effort to delineate the purpose, and the limits, of self-revelation—an effort that will continue throughout Merton's life—indicates the importance Merton attaches to his journal-writing, a genre that many readers consider to be the most significant of his entire corpus, in large part precisely because of its balance of honesty and modesty, forthrightness and reticence. But his ultimate criterion is enunciated early on: "Confessions are only valid (in literature) if they confess God" (21).

The most important topic Merton is both forthright and reticent about in these journals is, of course, his vocational struggle. The reticence is more immediately apparent than the forthrightness. There is no mention, for example, of the scene recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain* when Merton decides to become a priest after a late night out on the town with his friends. The first indication of his intention is the brief note on October 4, 1939 (the Feast of St. Francis), that "soon I will have all the necessary documents together and will write to the Father Provincial" (40), though on October 16 there is a long retrospective account, prompted by his visit to the diocesan vocation director, of the course of his efforts to that point, especially Father Ford's arguments in favor of the secular priesthood and Dan Walsh's encouragement of his interest in the Franciscans. The most evocative comment comes at the end of the entry: "But now, on top of this, the arguments in Saint Thomas: that the man who has repented of great sins should forsake even lawful things and give up even more than those who have always obeyed God, and sacrifice *everything*. Nothing was ever so near certain. *Deo Gratias!*" (60). Of course what was "so near certain" became far from certain as pertaining to the Franciscans, but Aquinas is speaking of religious life, not specifically of Franciscanism, and ultimately Merton's confidence proved to be well founded: there is an uncanny anticipation here of the phrasing that will recur (minus the explicitly penitential motivation) as his wrestling with the vocational issue nears its climax: "[G]oing to the Trappists is exciting and fills me with awe, and desire; and I return to the idea 'Give up *everything—everything!*'" (456; in a slightly revised form, this is the penultimate line of *The Secular Journal*, while there are six more very significant entries in this complete version).

After mid-October the Franciscan vocation seems to be largely taken for granted, or at least the matter seems settled in Merton's own mind. It certainly does not dominate his thoughts, at least those that he writes down; it does not seem to excite him or fill him with awe or engage his imagination in any profound way, perhaps because, as he later realizes, "there was much that was very imperfect about my motives" (461). He does mention Ed Rice's thoughts about priesthood (61), the Franciscans' devotion to St. Philomena (65), a Greenwich Village peasant wood-seller as a good model for Franciscans (70), and, eventually, on December 11, his disappointment that he will have to wait until August to be admitted to the novitiate (101). After this entry, the vocation question virtually disappears from the journals, first because he is set to join the Franciscans, then because he is not. The most significant reticence concerns Father Edmund's reversal, late in the summer of 1940, of his decision to admit Merton. It is only much later, on March 2, 1941, and then obliquely, that he writes, "I was very happy last year up to the time I learned I had no vocation for the priesthood and was not acceptable. After that the year complicated itself terribly" (315). It is impossible to determine whether Merton never confided his feelings about this rejection to his journal at all or did so at the time and later destroyed the pages, since no handwritten journal for the period from mid-February through mid-October 1940 remains (if indeed there was a handwritten journal for this period).

But as early as February 8, 1941, in one of the interior dialogues Merton occasionally invents, "Q" asks, "Incidentally, now that we have mentioned the plan you once entertained, this time last year, of you know what: How does it look now?" "A" responds, "The same. But I think I'd be a Trappist" (303). Already, two months before his visit to Gethsemani, at a time when he presumes that the priesthood is an impossibility for him, an attraction to the Cistercians is making itself felt. As late as the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 27, he is still uncertain if he "will get to Gethsemani Monastery, near Louisville, for Holy Week" (327), but of course he does, and his life, and therefore his journal, are radically affected. His later comments on the retreat reveal that it was more complicated and conflicted than his immediate written reflections indicate, precisely because he was thrown into turmoil about whether he could possibly have a Trappist vocation himself, an idea that he is still calling an "irrelevant question" and a "futile argument" at Our Lady of the Valley nearly four months later (399). He entrusts none of this to the journal at the time, but the longing is not far

beneath the surface of his awed admiration for this "earthly paradise" that is also "an earthly purgatory" (335—shades of Dante and seeds of *The Seven Storey Mountain!*), "one of the last good places in the universe" (341), "the most beautiful place in America" (347). (The old habit of superlatives is far from disappearing!) Little wonder that Louisville was a disappointment.

It is in the fall of 1941 that the vocational drama becomes central in Merton's own mind and in the journal. Though he claims during his second retreat that "[t]his time I have no perplexities about a vocation to be a Trappist—so far! I cannot be a priest" (396), if the perplexities have indeed disappeared they will soon return. On November 4 he writes, "I still think of the Trappists. And I still wonder if what was an obstacle to the Franciscans might not be one to the Trappists: and I still keep thinking: maybe I could write to them and find out. And still I do not" (449). The question is made more urgent by alternative possibilities, either freely chosen (work at Friendship House) or imposed (the army). This part of the story is, of course, very familiar to anyone even moderately acquainted with Merton's life, but the day-to-day account of the dilemma and its resolution provides a dramatic intensity not available elsewhere, even in the edited version of the same material in *The Secular Journal*. Whereas that volume ends with the portentous decision to "speak to one of the Friars," here the next entry traces the result of that resolution, the hesitations finally overcome, the consultation with Father Philotheus, the lifting of the cloud, the advice to go to Gethsemani over Christmas, the "prayers and prayers and prayers" of thanksgiving (458). And then, once the decision is made, the action suddenly accelerates as a new notice from the draft board arrives, two days later, prompting in Merton both a tremendous sense of relief that he had already confronted the issue and not given in to the temptation "to let the whole thing wait several days" (465), for a delay would have tainted the decision with doubts about his true motives, and a confidence "that, whether I am drafted or not, I may sometime be a Trappist" (466). Though in the final entry (two days before Pearl Harbor) he is still waiting for responses from the draft board to his request for a delay of his reexamination, and from the abbey to his request to move up his visit, in less than a week he will be at Gethsemani to begin the second half of his life. "The Story of a Vocation" has reached its superb climax.

And yet, as Merton himself writes in this final entry, this is still just "the real beginning of my conversion" (470), the beginning of a

process of growth and transformation that will move in directions that would surprise the Thomas Merton of December 5, 1941. Two days earlier he had written, "No more concern with opinions about worldly ideas, politics, or books: they are knocked out of me: and if I may come to be a Trappist, I hope they are knocked out of me for good!" (469); they may have been, temporarily, but not, fortunately, "for good." Likewise, when Father Philotheus cautions him "to be very careful about deciding to be a Trappist" and asks, "What about my vocation to be a writer?" Merton's response is: "That one has absolutely no meaning any more, as soon as he has said what he has said" (458). But the word "vocation" here, whether quoted from Philotheus or inserted, unwittingly, by Merton himself, resonates more strongly than the author of the journal would have realized at the time.

For Run to the Mountain is ultimately a story not of two separate vocations, but of a single vocation with two major dimensions, co-existing in a fruitful (though not always harmonious) tension that would make Thomas Merton the most widely read Cistercian in history. It is immensely stimulating and satisfying finally to have the opportunity to observe so directly this early stage, complex in its details, luminously simple in its conclusion, in the development of a vocation that would enable Thomas Merton to recognize and to realize his full identity as monk, as writer, as image of God and, as he wrote so memorably in the (second) "Fourth and Walnut" passage, as "a member of the human race."