

The pathos of Merton's experience at the hermitage lies of course in the very fact that he is living 'under the bomb'. There can be no 'reaching after fact & reason' in the shadow of nuclear holocaust, and nothing Merton can do—spiritually or politically—can alter a world caught up in a 'demonic illusion'. Caught between the monastery and the secular world, Merton discovers he is, at best, 'non-attached, non-identified, and the hermitage ... a kind of nowhere'. Reflecting on the racism and hatred at work in the American South, he argues that 'it is the dark and terrible face of God that looks at America', but as we read so often in the Old and New Testament, the voice of God can only be heard in the world's desert places. The hermitage will be that desert. Merton takes comfort in knowing that the hollow where his hermitage is located was once occupied by slave cabins, for he considers himself 'both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner'. Both prisoners and monks share the life of the cell, but within the walls of the monastery 'The voice of God is not "heard" at every moment, and part of the "work of the cell"', for the true monastic, 'is attention so that one may not miss any sound of that voice'. Watching each morning as the SAC bomber flies overhead and listening each afternoon to the guns at Fort Knox rumbling over the hills, Merton feels that he has achieved the silence necessary to hear the voice of God speaking to 'a nation intent upon destruction ... It is necessary to be alone, to be not part of this, to be in the exile of silence, to be in a manner of speaking a political prisoner'.

The heart of Merton's thinking on his position both in the church and in the world comes in response to his reading of Rudolf Karl Bultmann, who argues, 'Real belief in God is *not a general truth* at my disposal which I can perceive and apply; on the contrary it is what it is only as something continually perceived afresh'. Merton replies in his journal, 'What does this involve? A constant crisis of belief! ... Time is given us not to *keep* a faith we once had, but to acquire a faith we need *now*'. Again, in response to the claim from Maurice Merleau-Ponty—'I am myself as I exist in the world'—Merton writes, 'how else can one be anything except by being what he is ... That is one reason for a Journal like this, to keep honestly situated'. It is clear in these and other passages that Merton deliberately invites the ambiguity that sustains so much of his truly creative thinking throughout these years. Once more, thinking of Martin Luther's critique of religious vows, Merton comments, 'Simply to enclose oneself in the "given" is no glory to God'. Both Luther and Erasmus strove to reinvigorate what they considered a lifeless, dessicated and ritualized Christianity. The question for Merton at the end of 1965 is how he can remain, unlike Luther, in unity with the church while reviving a sense of truly sacred. As a tool for Merton's spiritual and intellectual development, the journal becomes a sounding board for provoking the crisis of faith necessary to inspire the glory of a living God and so keep 'honestly situated' in himself, the church and the world.

Michael Johann

MERTON, Thomas, *Learning to Love* (Journals; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 382. USA \$30.00/Canada \$42.00. ISBN 0-06-065484-8 (cloth).

One afternoon in 1966, I passed Fr Louis on his way from 'the steel building' where one of the three phones connecting him to 'the outside' was located. By the primitive Trappist sign language still in use, I told him one of the brothers had

listened in on a phone conversation of his and had informed the Abbot how it concerned a woman and about something of the kind of talk involved. His eyes seemed to sink into his head, he reeled subtly, and then with decisive step he changed direction and walked towards the monastery, making a hand-sign about speaking to the Abbot. From the account in this journal I learn I was not the first person to give him this news. He had already decided that the cat was out of the bag, and he had best go see the Abbot before the Abbot came to see him.

By then I was hardly the only one in on the news, since the office where he placed his calls was rather busy with monks in and out. And perhaps the Abbot received multiple reports. In any case, Fr Louis did not wait to be chased down by the Abbot but went to Abbot James on his own accord.

Reading private journals is not a little like listening in on another person's telephone conversation. It can intrigue, yet also perhaps bore you with more information than you care to listen to. Volume 1 of the seven volumes of private journals is full of writing exercises, word lists written in free association, clever in their own way if you want to read pretty good student work. Pages of Volumes 5 and 6 are sweat towels wringing with grievance and complaint against the Abbot and community. Especially about the Abbot. I suppose it was better he get it out on paper rather than keep it cooking inside. One man's personal therapy may be too stiff a medicine for another.

Merton understood his own excess in this regard. I remember some conversations in which we would indulge in criticism about the Abbot or community, and just when it was becoming a ripping good time he would suddenly stop, pause, give me a mock frown and say: 'You could never be my Abbot!'

Writing in all its forms was an integral part of Thomas Merton's quest for holiness. It was an instrument to keep himself honest and clear, and he used it to the hilt. The result, especially in this volume, is an extraordinary record of the inner dynamics of a monk's life. Perhaps nowhere in nearly 2000 years of monastic literature has there ever been such an intimate view of struggle and real purgation with regard to celibacy. Nor with regard to the deep love and total affection a monk might feel for a woman.

Considering all the centuries of monastic literature, this is one of the most distinctive contributions ever made towards understanding the solitary life, and the necessity of integrating it with human love and passion, not to mention compassion.

One can read chapter after chapter of John Cassian or St Aelred on the virtue of chastity, of human and divine love, of affection and friendship. Nowhere does one get more than an abstract of what personal struggles that entails. These are written with detachment, in third-person language, antiseptic and objective; helpful when used properly, but aloof and clear of the confusion, stress and turmoil of moments of decision.

In Volume 3, *A Search for Solitude*, editor Lawrence Cunningham points out quite correctly how the classic symptoms of *acedia* (restlessness, ennui), as described in Cassian, find vivid illustration in Merton's own doubts about stability at Gethsemani, and his desire for eremitical life elsewhere.

Volume 6, *Learning to Love*, leaves one with a tremendous impression of the immense conflict and feelings of divided loyalties that his love for M presents. The course of this episode has already been well charted in *Follow the Ecstasy* by John

Howard Griffin, and *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* by Michael Mott. Here we read of it in Merton's own words and see it all from his own point of view, with all the urgency and poignancy of the unfolding story. As always, Merton is more compelling in writing about himself than are those who write about him.

Merton's openness and his gift for language, his insight, training and knowledge all tumble along with him as he shoots the rapids in this three- to five-month episode. In Part One of the book, 'Being in One Place', there is a calm so pervasive as to be suspicious. He has settled into a quiet routine in his first four months in the hermitage. He is reading Rilke, Nishida, thinking about Marxism and studying monastic sources. He keeps track of the monastery news about a possible foundation in Norway. He has several premonitions of an early death, some concern about his health, and some regrets about his relationship to women in the past. He has inklings of unfinished business in regard to women. In Rilke he perceived a solitude which was both great and flawed. He wonders if the same judgment does not hold for his own solitude.

Part Two, 'Daring to Love', opens with his back operation and the initial contacts with the feminine care and attention of the nurses: 'I got a very friendly and devoted student nurse working on my compresses etc. and this livened things up considerably. In fact we were getting perhaps too friendly ...' (p. 38).

Later, reflecting on his own *Thoughts in Solitude*, written 15 years previously, he is struck with the idea 'that nothing counts but love and that a solitude that is not simply the wide-openness of love and freedom is nothing' (p. 40). In this he is defining the polarity of the great crisis that is virtually upon him. 'Love and solitude are the one ground of true maturity and freedom.'

It is often asked how Merton could have gone on to incur all the risks, danger and possible damages to himself, to M and to others of this impending relationship. Even as it developed he was warning her how it could not go on. Yet he was convinced at the moment of its tremendous seriousness and urgency. Both his own spiritual idealism and his felt need for maturity seemed to be driving him forward. Life had presented him with a person who loved him in a way no other had. The love was mutual; and perplexing as it was, he responded.

History will ask if there was anything more than subjective projection in this, and whether the mutuality was real. Only one side of the story has been told. And in this decade of the 1990s we do not like privacy of any sort. We believe it always implies some malfeasance. We want to inspect and pass judgment on every case.

Perhaps judgment is the wrong perspective and a fruitless hermeneutic in any case. Merton's own reflections and judgments were quite conflicted as he went along. In the aftermath he speaks of his own folly, and as late as August 1968 he disclaims his 'incredible stupidity in 1966!' (*The Other Side of the Mountain* [Journals; ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Harper & Row, 1998], p. 157).

Yet, he makes apology about his own negative judgments: 'Too much analyzing. I think that this view I have of my love for M in this Journal is a bit distorted by self-questioning, anxiety and guilt. Perhaps I have too much a tendency to question myself out of existence' (p. 126).

So may it be.

Nonetheless, I as a monk, reading from a hermeneutic of asceticism, find much that is valuable and useful in the heat of his struggle with the heart.

All I can do now is to ask to serve God as the instrument of His love for her. And to be attentive to His will (p. 133).

I see that I have to really love her and not just love or love her body. It is a training in realism and in love of the *person* she is (a person inexhaustibly beautiful and lovable to me).

[I am] not lonely for M but in some strange way lonely *with* her, as if she had somehow peacefully become part of my loneliness and of my life that tries to be in God, tries to dwell at the point where life and grace well up out of the unknown (p. 49).

I am glad of my love for M, which adds a special note of absurdity and therefore of reality to my professed 'solitude'. It is in many ways the best thing that could have happened. But I do not value our love for that: what a betrayal that would be! I value it because of her (p. 323).

I hear less truth in his later disclaimers and his efforts to distance himself from the whole episode, than in the rapture and confusion of his love. It is there that the reality of the tension between solitude and love, between freedom and obedience, between purity and passion—all the opposites of a complete life—are having their riotous set to. The bewilderment, the ecstasy, the regret and the gratitude are more real than the tidying up that comes later. Such subsequent remarks might clarify judgment, but do they deepen insight?

Monastic literature needs the battle scenes of the heart as they appear here. The honesty, openness and deep feeling articulates the experience that many monks and nuns, committed priests and religious, are sometimes too baffled to express for themselves.

Perhaps there is enough restlessness and reversals in this volume to make the reading tedious. Such are the flaws of an unedited journal. And the decision to place 'The Midsummer Diary' (a parallel journal written for M) in the appendix, means that section may read like a rehash. Reading it in its chronological context is more compelling.

The editorial omissions of certain passages are indicated where they occur. This is explained, in the introduction, as by agreement of the Merton Legacy Trust and the Abbot, 'to respect the privacy of persons still living'. This was not done without some debate since the whole series claims to transcribe the complete holograph. Contrary to what one might expect, Abbot Kelly was initially in favour of leaving them in. The decision was referred to the Merton Legacy Trust who for legal and professional reasons favoured the omissions, and to that the Abbot agreed.

When Abbot Dom James Fox, as was inevitable, mandated no more contacts with the nurse, the story changed but did not end. One wonders: if there had been no intervention by the Abbot, what difference would it have made in the whole episode? It was no longer possible to work out the relationship in its own terms. But that may not have been possible in any case. Merton's ideal of integrating solitude and human, romantic love may have been possible in principle, but only when both parties are pursuing the same goal. It has to be as mutual as the love itself. If the two are on different vocational tracks, with different biological clocks, one person or the other has to change drastically. Merton was unwilling to marry, even though he felt they were already 'married spiritually'. She was unable to accept the incongruity.

In the end it did not successfully continue as a relationship. Perhaps it opened up for Merton a glimpse of what the integration of love and solitude might be, but there is no clear indication that Merton felt he had achieved that. He never proclaimed the episode a success, and might have called it futile—but without 'the lip-smacking over the bitterness and futility of it'. There is no talk about tragedy. 'Life is not futile if you simply live it. It remains futile, however, as long as you keep watching yourself live it' (p. 322).

The remainder of the journal appears to me just this: an unselfconscious living from day to day, with its usual interests, gripes and rewards. Occasionally there is some letter or phone call from M, and this throws him right back into all his helplessness. But the weight of the situation and his own choices lead to continued life in the hermitage.

One would expect some notable effort on his part to surmise what wisdom was gained from this experience, yet only the briefest remarks appear in this volume and in Volume 7, and they are usually negative in tone. This is a surprising omission indeed, and one might surmise that this is precisely the content of an unpublished writing of this period entitled *Retrospect*. *Retrospect* was an extended letter written to M, and a copy was mailed to J. Laughlin with the stipulation that it was not for publication. By Merton's request it was not to be shown to anyone. It will eventually be placed in the Houghton Library at Harvard.

By his own account, Merton considered *Retrospect* 'poorly written and not very interesting'.

I just thought I would write, for her, an account of what the whole thing has looked like. But I did not really manage it very well, and it is a poor piece of writing. Still, I thought it ought to be there with the other stuff as an authentic record.¹

For someone pursuing a monastic or other hermeneutic this leaves a critical gap. Was Merton better off for this experience or worse? What might a monk or nun learn from it? Perhaps the absence of such an overview itself is significant. Any effort to summarize or judge it may have seemed a falsification. The text we are presented with shows sufficient depth of beauty, love and loyalty, beyond all the ambiguity, to give us a much needed wisdom on what celibacy and monastic life is for someone so deeply committed to the search for God as was Thomas Merton.

Paul Quenon, OCSO

COOPER, David D. (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), pp. 320. \$35.00 hb.

The most significant sentence of this selection is seemingly innocuous. Written neither by Thomas Merton nor James Laughlin—the founder of New Directions Publishing—but by David D. Cooper, the volume's editor, the sentence appears early in the text:

In preparing these letters for publication, I employ the editorial apparatus designed by Hugh Witemeyer for his edition of *William Carlos Williams and*

1. David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 290.