

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals, 7; 1967–1968; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. xix + 384. ISBN 0-06-0654-864 (cloth). \$30.

During Holy Week in 1968 Merton noted Martin Luther King Jr's violent death as an apocalyptic sign, a confirmation that it was 'a beast of a year' (p. 78).

Merton's own Aunt Kit, from Christchurch, New Zealand, was to die that same week in a tragic shipwreck. Hers was a 'naked and terrible' death, 'the real thing', not easy for love to bear (p. 85).

The murder of Robert Kennedy two months later, not to mention the unmitigated conflict that was the Vietnam war, did nothing to allay Merton's concerns for what the roiling year might mean. We might say that his own death on 10 December made his sense of how the year might unfold a terrible prophecy.

But as the seventh and last volume of Merton's journals makes clear, the year as seen through Merton's contemplative eyes was not without light and hope, revealed in places both ordinary and extraordinary.

The Other Side of the Mountain contains Merton's Gethsemani journal dating from October 1967, and those journals Merton kept while traveling in 1968. It encompasses his visits to New Mexico and California in May, as well as his sojourn in Alaska in September to give a retreat to a group of priests and sisters in the Anchorage area (agreed to partly as a way to defray expenses en route to Asia), and, finally, his experiences in India and Bangkok. In this respect, it covers much more ground than the previously published *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, though has less explanatory commentary, particularly in terms of the Eastern religious concepts to which Merton frequently refers.

This volume includes the journals corresponding to the previously published *Woods, Shore, Desert*,² Merton's own edited record of his visits to the Monastery of Christ in the Desert in New Mexico and Our Lady of the Redwoods, the Trappistine monastery in northern California, as well as *Thomas Merton in Alaska*.³

It should not, however, be considered a substitute for these publications which

1. Ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1968).

2. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982.

3. New York: New Directions, 1988.

contain much other material, including photographs, letters, and tape transcripts, and thus which provide a more multidimensional picture of Merton's various journeys. At the same time, it is different from them in important ways, allowing us to view Merton's year as a continuum, and providing the means of comparing his perspective while at Gethsemani with his experiences elsewhere. As general editor and volume editor, Brother Patrick judiciously chose to begin this last volume of the journal series with Merton's entries in the fall of 1997.

They correspond to the abbatial transition from Dom James Fox to Fr Flavian Burns, which concerned Merton, and which proved decisive in terms of opening the door to new experience and learning through travel.

Among the matters of concern Merton raises in his journal, some are familiar, some less so. The year began with anxious speculation about the results, for Gethsemani as a monastic community and for Merton himself, of the abbatial election to replace Dom James Fox. One realizes in reading his ruminations how intertwined emotionally, and in some sense spiritually, Merton's life was with that of the community, his status as a hermit notwithstanding. There is also Merton's recurring lament at the porousness of his physical solitude, his self-scrutiny in this respect, and his pondering on the possibility and desirability of relocation—to California, to New Mexico, to Alaska, to Central America with Ernesto Cardenal, to Asia. There is a familiar kind of restlessness resonating from passages in which Merton confronts the question of a more secure solitude. At times one wonders whether the matter is resolvable for him, whether he can deepen his spiritual life or find peace without an accompanying restlessness, whether in fact a certain Augustinian restlessness was necessary to sustain his effort, to keep him, to put it in terms congenial to Chatral Rinpoche, a Buddhist spiritual leader with whom Merton spoke, 'on the edge of great realization' (p. 278).

To the extent that we as readers identify Merton's search for peace and spiritual depth with our own, the implications seem as important for us as for him.

In any event, we travel with him, expectantly, hopefully, awaiting what illumination might come, confronting through him what is misleading or illusory along the way.

Travel—particularly direct contact with the mountains of Alaska and the Himalayas, the Pacific Ocean and the lamas of Darjeeling—seems to provide perspective for Merton on the persistent question of reconciling place and solitude.

His sense of the importance of Gethsemani as his home is strengthened, and not at odds with the idea of actually living elsewhere. As he writes, 'I do in many ways miss [Gethsemani]... It is my monastery and being away has helped me see it in perspective and love it more.' At the same time, there is a 'general turbulence there', external and internal, making the solitude of a place like Alaska appealing (p. 282).

Merton's direct encounters with the conceptual and experiential roots of Eastern religious tradition (e.g. *dzogchen*) and, more importantly, with learned spiritual leaders such as Chatral Rinpoche and the Dalai Lama who personify them, seemingly open his own inner path; more than once he mentions a 'good meditation', more than once he records saying the Office with Buddhist chants or Tibetan voices in the background, a wonderful juxtaposition.

There are other such juxtapositions, for example, a meditation on the 'ultimate emptiness' of *dzogchen*, Christ as Light, and the lighting of lamps at dusk at the

Mim Tea Estate (pp. 285-86). One never senses that Merton explores Buddhism as a confrontation to his Christianity.

He is deeply interested in Buddhist spiritual and mental disciplines and meditation practices, and the experience and consciousness which they can foster. He is open himself to what can be learned through the experience of these practices, and the level of communication and dialogue which can be developed through their common experience. He himself provides an indication of the potentiality of transcultural experience and dialogue in his own mutually enjoyed and enriching conversations with the lamas.

One of the joys for close readers of *The Other Side of the Mountain* is Merton's record of nature and people. There is something clean, unfiltered and real in some of the images that appear quietly sometimes suddenly in the narrative, or sometimes in between narrative fragments. We see them whole as Merton must have, with therefore a kind of contemplative awareness. The journal begins with Merton's description of the moon as 'beautiful, dimly red, like a globe of almost transparent amber, with a shapeless foetus of darkness curled in the midst of it. It hung there between two tall pines, silent, unexplained, small ...' (p. 3).

On the way to Dharamsala, he wrote, 'A white crane starts up out of the green rushes' (p. 236). Later, 'Two white butterflies alight on separate flowers. They rise, play together briefly, accidentally in the air, then depart in different directions' (p. 255).

In one instance, Merton refers to 'a beautiful baby'; in Bangkok, to 'lovely people'. There are other references and images, some deliberately mixed as a kind of poetic montage and commentary, the notes of a traveler seeing more fully perhaps, though with no less interest, than his youthful counterpart in Europe and Cuba many years earlier.

A marked contrast, some readers might be disturbed by Merton's rather callous mention of burning 'M's' letters (p. 157); another reference to 'M.' is much more sympathetic (p. 19).

It would be tempting to read *The Other Side of the Mountain* as the final testament of an extraordinary spiritual journey, as a final message to us. Indeed, the title teases us in that respect. It derives from Merton's encounter with Kanchenjunga, the Himalyan peak hovering over his thoughts in Darjeeling, which became the focal point of what he hoped to learn from the spirituality of the East.

But Merton, of course, had no foreknowledge of his death, and we must try to see the journal as the record of the continuation of his journey, and not romanticize it as its culmination. One reads parts of this journal in fact with a strong sense of familiarity in the thematic content and tone—which is not to say that it is any less evocative or compelling than Merton's other personal writing. It is Merton still identifying and shedding illusions, still orienting and attuning himself in being and love, still reconciling some of the tensions involved in living a solitude that embraces the world (or when a world embraces his solitude at Gethsemani); more maturely aware, perhaps, though seemingly struggling to attain more simple, whole, and constant and compassionate awareness. At the same time one is aware that it corresponds to an extraordinary change in his monastic and quasi-eremitic life, that it is the record of his last written thoughts, and that Merton himself viewed his trip to Asia with great expectation. 'May I not come back without having settled the great affair', he writes tantalizingly, '[a]nd found also the great

compassion ...' (p. 206). It is fascinating to track the effect of his direct contact with the East on Merton's own Christian spiritual insight and on his understanding of the possibility for Western religious renewal.

Indeed, like so much of Merton's writing, it seems to reach us personally. In following Merton's encounter with the spiritual traditions of the East, we are encountered, opened up, see our own hidden hopes revealed.

Readers interested in charting Merton's continuing journey, in questions linking his Christianity and monastic perspective with the East, or in Merton's direct engagement with the world beyond Gethsemani and Louisville will appreciate and enjoy *The Other Side of the Mountain*. Brother Patrick Hart is an unobtrusive but sympathetic editor, who provides the minimum of necessary information to identify or clarify places, books, people and other references made by Merton.

The appearance of *The Other Side of the Mountain* culminates the posthumous publication of Merton's complete journal writings. Though it might seem to signify the ready availability of all significant Merton writing 30 years after his death, this is not the case. Anyone who has done research in the Merton archive at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College knows that Merton's reading notebooks, as well as his teaching notes, among other more fragmentary pieces, provide additional insight into his thinking, into the sources he consulted and from which he learned, and through which he opened others to learning. And lying innocently on a notebook page here and there, ready to surprise, or to confront, or to evoke more wonder at the man, are Merton's momentary insights and responses to what he was reading, or, even more profoundly perhaps, a poem or intimation of a poem suggesting some deeper experience. To say that we have the full set of journals, as much as they may give us a scrupulous account of Merton's thought, does not mean that we can now fully know Merton. There is too much in between the words, too much underneath them and beside them.

They represent many places that we need to try to find for ourselves.

Thomas Del Prete

MERTON, Thomas. *The Merton Tapes*. Lectures Series, 7. Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1997–1998. 13 cassettes (60 minutes each). \$9.95 each.

1. 'Surrender to God' (AA 2904)
2. 'Poetry and Scripture' (AA 2905)
3. 'The Fully Human Being' (AA 2906)
4. 'Love Is Enough' (AA 2907)
5. 'Poetry: The Angelic Realm' (AA 2908)
6. 'Awakening the Heart' (AA 2911)
7. 'Facing the Truth of Life' (AA 2912)
8. 'Seeking and Finding God' (AA 2913)
9. 'The Door of Paradise' (AA 2914)
10. 'The Contemplative Call' (AA 2915)
11. 'The Desert God' (AA 3017)
12. 'Love and Purity of Heart' (AA 3018)
13. 'Poverty and Religious Experience' (AA 3019)

Visitors to Gethsemani often expressed surprise upon their arrival at the abbey. Monasteries, after all, were supposed to be somber, austere places. Laughter in a