

with several passages from the talks Merton gave in Asia shortly before he died.

In subsequent parts of the book, Merton writes about the role of the poet, his solidarity with poets, and his hope for poetry as "a kind of recovery of paradise." As Merton put it in a review of *The Legend of Tucker Caliban*, "There is no revolution without prophetic sages." We read selections from Merton's letters to fellow writers, including Mark Van Doren, Boris Pasternak, Czeslaw Milosz, Napoleon Chow, James Baldwin, Henry Miller and Walker Percy as well as excerpts from Merton's literary essays particularly those pertaining to Pasternak and Camus. We read Merton's reflections "On His Own Writing," drawn from letters to monastic superiors and fellow monks that record Merton's struggles with censors and superiors, as well as from letters to working writers like himself whom he encourages and by whom he himself is encouraged.

The book ends with a short section of "Advice to Writers," gleaned from sources as varied as *The Inner Experience* and *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Merton's advice is well summed up in a few lines in a letter to Ernesto Cardenal: "Basically our first duty today it to human truth in its existential reality, and this sooner or later brings us into confrontations with systems and power." Meant for writers, Merton's words offer advice to readers and a challenge as well.

*Echoing Silence* is "a keeper"—one of those books that invites a reader to return to its pages—again and again—to enjoy Merton's insight and wisdom. And like all good anthologies, it is likely motivate many a reader, as it does this one, to return to the sources from which these selections were so carefully drawn.

Christine M. Bochen

*Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton.* A Film by Morgan Atkinson

Virtually all of the images chronicling Thomas Merton's short but rich life belong to the genre of photography and not film. Other than a poor quality 8mm film of an October 10, 1968 address that Merton presented on Marxism in Bangkok, Thailand—shortly before his tragic and untimely death—we have been left with no other known archival film of any period in the life of the man who many agree was the greatest spiritual master to grace the North American continent in the twentieth century. There are indeed prodigious biographical accounts, along with now voluminous

works on and about Merton's philosophical, literary and spiritual writings. These are in the form of scholarly works, written narrative, poetry, music, art, and theatre. Moreover, the Thomas Merton Center has dutifully digitized the well-prepared lectures Merton gave as novice master at Gethsemane—but here too, the listener must project his or her imagination to achieve any semblance of what it must have been like to be in the presence of a being of such immense spiritual light and wisdom.

*Soul Searching* is one such projection. Producer-director Morgan Atkinson has employed what has now become recognized as the Ken Burns style of documentary filmmaking: an interweaving of narration, montage, and interviews with accompanying musical support, all toward the end of evoking in our minds and imaginations Merton's unorthodox presence and charismatic appeal. Atkinson makes the directorial choice of beginning the film with Merton's infamous Asian journey; an event scholars suggest was, in profoundly unfathomable ways, the denouement of his existential and eremitical lives. We see in the Thomas Merton gazing toward the east, an ebullient seeker of truth and love. There can be no doubt that Merton's decision to travel to Asia, as well as his openness to Eastern spiritualities, brought about great confusion and consternation in the minds of those who perceived him to be a bastion of Cistercian monastic tradition and holiness. In *Soul Searching* we are reminded that Merton's more ripened spirituality (by his own admission) was rooted not in the dogma or ritual of Catholicism, but in a preternaturally direct experience of truth whose center can only be characterized (as it is in Taoism) as consistently fluid and formless. Thus, Merton's soul searching was born not entirely in the theatre of his mind, but in his embodiment as a human being, and in the moment-to-moment I-Thou encounter with other souls and the miraculous grace and numinosity of God's creation.

The film's initial musings around Merton's Asian journey seem short lived, morphing abruptly and somewhat awkwardly into a biographical perspective that asks the viewer to consider the young Thomas' profligate excesses in a context of speakeasies and galvanizing jazz music. It is within this transition that *Soul Searching* begins unfolding the existential narrative of Merton's ineffable conversion from a life of debauchery to his heart-centered epiphany of Christ as his Savior and lifeblood. If we consider that documentaries are produced primarily to educate, then *Soul Searching* has made a valuable contribution to its audience by portraying

Merton's tumultuous psychospiritual odyssey through the Scylla and Charybdis of his own mind and emotions. Lost, yet indefatigable, Merton's soul plunges into the depths of his own angst and despair, rising only momentarily before resuming its place in the wilderness of his loveless existence. The humiliation that Merton experienced as he contacted his inner demons, catalyzed him toward the realization and somewhat prophetic voice declaring, "It is time to stop being sick and be really well. It is time to be full of peace and silence." On his first visit to Gethsemane Merton was deeply affected by the Cistercian rhythms of prayer that seemed to him to contribute greatly in creating "a world of peace and silence." He perceived the incontrovertible importance of the monks' daily life of devotional prayer as critical to the survival of the world.

Merton's experiences of monastic life and Gethsemane's paradisiacal landscape corroborated what was already germinating in his psyche and soul as a result of the suffering he had encountered in his downtrodden secular life. While Merton came face to face with the dark and delusional forces that constitute the false self, his awareness penetrated into the ways ideologies and social structures fixated upon the meaningless and futile shibboleths of modern consumerist existence. Echoed in *Soul Searching* is the stentorian voice of John the Baptist in Merton's admonishment that the self-made man and unbridled freedom of corporations does not, in any real sense, constitute the "good life"—rather these phenomena are expressions of the spiritual ills of contemporary American society.

Merton seemed to be intent on awakening us to what is real, disabusing us of our everyday notions of what we assume to be implicitly valuable. Perhaps the greatest of these self-deceptions is the notion of becoming "someone." There are a number of interview segments in *Soul Searching* that present Merton's development as a contemplative more as a radical disidentification with his biographical self than, as many would imagine, an integrated coalescence of his former worldly incarnations. Moreover, he seemed intensely devoted to situating himself as an experiential witness to what was ontologically true. Complacency, for Merton, was the near enemy, and the somnambulant state of Heidegger's *Das Man* was, for him, an anathema of cosmic proportions, by dint of fact that such unconsciousness brings with it the obscuration of the existential and divine uniqueness that God imprints in each soul. *Soul Searching* provides us with more than ample justification

to reframe Merton's restlessness and dissatisfaction in his pursuit of the truth, not as an exercise in neurosis, but as a continual fountaining of renewals that were ultimately in the service of a higher ordering of his consciousness and infilling him with a bodhisattva-like compassion for the welfare of all sentient beings.

The leitmotif of death for the sake of love occupies an important perspective in the film. To undertake the death of the self is based unequivocally on the passion and desire to live one's life for God; which is tantamount to saying: to do things for love and love alone. It would come to be the mantra that Merton lived by: to act out of a love for God and our brothers and sisters.

Contrary to popular conceptions associated with monastic life as an enclave of blissfully pure souls anticipating union with God, through Merton's writings we become aware of the all too human realities of coenobitic life. Merton was able to articulate with great clarity the paradoxes that confronted the monks undertaking monastic asceticism. The juggernaut of dying to one's own personal identity in deference to a transcendent will, must have concerned Merton deeply, for there were novices who, to begin with, had entered cloistered life with poorly formed egos. There was a freedom waiting those who could give up their will to have God's will live within them, but this was problematic for the monks whose existential identities had not yet reached a level of development to allow for a relinquishing of the self to take place in a psychologically healthy way.

There are moments in which the film is able to capture some of the inner peace that is potentially available to the aspirant of contemplative life. Structurally however, *Soul Searching* is less compelling than the actual content of the film. There are too many narrators and, at times, the voiceover of Merton quotes is overdone and only adds to the aesthetic weaknesses of the montage. There are many scenes that appear rushed in the making and not very well thought through. While it is not always the case, the images seem incongruous with the selection of music.

*Soul Searching* can serve as an inspiring introduction to the life and spirituality of Thomas Merton. For those already familiar with Merton's writings there are pockets of revelation in the film that might not have been considered in a general perusal of his written works. One example involves the intermittent adversarial relationship Merton experienced with those who were in a position of authority to censor his writings. Merton's journal entries

leave the reader sympathetic to his point of view, especially in regard to his objection to being asked to cease writing about highly politicized topics such as war and nuclear arms. Abbot Frederick Dunn, who was responsible for reining in Merton's zeal, is cast in a more compassionate light for supporting Merton's writing as a form of spiritual practice.

In the end *Soul Searching* succeeds in communicating an idea that Merton embodied throughout the course of his life. Through the film we come closer to ascertaining what Merton—as a contemplative in thought, action and within the deeper realities of his heart—realized through direct experience of spiritual life: which is to say, “the mystical journey is profoundly human.”

Arthur Giacalone

MERTON, Thomas. *In My Own Words*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (Liguori, MO: Liguori, 2007), pp. xi + 112. ISBN 978-0-7648-1671-0. \$14.95.

Yes, Thomas Merton in his own words, but in a curiously narrow selection of those words, one that I find puzzling. I say narrow rather than focused; because although the book is designed as a selection of statements about what Merton saw as his “core task: to realize union with God by prayer and monastic contemplative living” (x), it provides in my view a very limited take on what “monastic contemplative living” as lived out by Merton actually was.

The selections taken together overwhelmingly emphasize Merton's identity as a Catholic Christian, and the place of Christ in his life as a monk.

I have not the slightest desire to contest these points; indeed, with the editor, I affirm them. But the book's overall effect is one that made me wonder whether it might not have been edited the way it was to prove to the editors of the recent American Catholic catechism, the one from which Merton was excised, that they had been mistaken in their decision to exclude him. The Merton of this anthology would never have become an interfaith pioneer, an outspoken peace activist, a practitioner of Zen calligraphy or printmaking, or the author of “Day of a Stranger.” In one excerpt from *Contemplation in a World of Action*, it is true, Merton does say that the monastic life is “not only contemplative but prophetic”