

displays Merton's love for his living community and his dutiful cooperation with his abbot in his role as novice master.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Early Essays, 1947-1952*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015), pp. vii + 168. ISBN 978-0-87907-266-7 (paper) \$19.95.

I would like to focus this review of Thomas Merton's *Early Essays, 1947-1952* on the *simple experience* of appreciating this particular set of writings within the general context of Merton's work. Not to be too cryptic or provocative at the outset, I will thus proceed in a fairly mundane manner only to give way to joyful celebration in signaling how this book enables us to better appreciate Merton's overall expressive life that helps crack open our lives so that our living life dawns on us.

Simply put, this is a collection of twelve essays, mainly written by Merton between 1947 and 1950, with one lone article from 1952. The timeframe is important because the original edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in 1948, followed by a mass-market edition in 1952. Remember how his remarkable autobiography concludes with an Epilogue, penned in 1947, in which Merton claims that "America is discovering the contemplative life."¹ It is from this rooster-like announcement that these "early essays" begin to rise and spread the vital news of such a discovery.

As usual, Patrick O'Connell continues his dependable, impeccable scholarship in handling Merton's writings with archival brilliance; in this case, he has elected to neatly organize the essays into two groups: the first six essays in the collection were published in *The Commonweal* (as it was then called), while the second set of six were published in five different publications (two in the magazine *Integrity*). O'Connell's Introduction and insightful summaries of each article supply the publishing history and any other background information the reader might suddenly wonder about, making the entire book a complete study in and of itself. The Foreword is gracefully written by Jonathan Montaldo, a wayfarer-scholar always helping readers appreciate the deep struggle in Merton's voice, journey and soul as he expresses the life within him and brings hope to our own struggles. Montaldo recognizes, here, that though Merton's voice may seem young in these first public essays, it is unmistakably Merton's spirited voice we are listening to. And there is much to hear.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 414.

The topics of the essays are familiar themes and questions pursued throughout Merton's writing career, but here we are privileged to behold the initial trajectory of his contemplative vision before it fully enters the hot crucible of argument, correction, objection, dismissal, suspicion, doubt and fires of criticism where he will be often misunderstood, even rejected. In these early essays, then, are the first workings of Merton's articulate style. His voice is fresh, eager, positive, enthusiastic and naturally unaware of all the costs that authentic communion must eventually entail.

Merton is writing these essays some six years after becoming a monk, and although he is just beginning to find his pedagogical voice, it is especially clear that he is still using his notes from studying Thomas Aquinas and working from a sense of how contemplation seems to open the system of life. And yet, we see too his reliance on John of the Cross for correcting any easy logics regarding contemplation's flight above systems, structures, concepts, words and deeper into the mystery of transcendent life.

Merton's central theme in these early essays is contemplation, the merits and rigors of the contemplative life. He delves into related reflections on Trappist identity, the normalcy of mysticism, the discipline of devotion and asceticism, but the overarching concern is centered on the meaning, primacy and necessity of contemplation in human life. He is clear and adamant that true contemplation is available to all and yet he realizes that few will uncover the signs of access to this narrow road that begins within their own heart. Merton speaks because he wants us to hear the deep voice within us. His words are echoes of that Voice. He will learn soon enough just how much of a cacophony results when voices begin to battle one another in destroying the silence one needs for listening within. Hence one of the substantial values of this collection is the inclusion of three interrelated articles with battle scars: one is Merton's essay on "Active and Contemplative Orders" (28-38), which another writer heavily criticized as "perplexing" in an article included in the Appendix (146-60) – followed by Merton's veiled but broadened response to that criticism in his journal, defending the "primacy of contemplation" (161-66). The entire exchange provides a glimpse of the pounding and hounding that would shadow Merton's struggles between lucidity and misunderstanding.

The most remarkable essay in this collection, in my opinion, is "Contemplation in a Rocking Chair" (91-102), originally published in *Integrity* in August 1948. He opens the essay with a critique of the "genius for evasions" (92) generated by middle-class culture's most popular ways of avoiding thinking and becoming so easily deadened by accepting substitute activities for living action. The essay is a creative, updated

critique of quietism as false contemplation, and reveals Merton's burgeoning penchant for contemplative critique wherever "activity" becomes "a refuge" for laziness and evading the darkness of God seems too close for comfort. He argues for one duty: "the evasion of all these evasions and the discovery of reality" (101).

Perhaps a temptation facing a long-time reader of Merton might be to over-qualify these early essays as not quite ready for prime time. Everything Merton ever wrote, however, came out of genuine experience. We can no more separate these early essays from his mature work than we can dismiss his later essays because he died at the young age of 53. Seeds of contemplation were swirling around Merton when he was born. His expressive life has consistently helped us see and gather seeds swirling around our own lives. Between 1947 and 1952, therefore, we see Merton harvesting the bounty from earlier seeds while new seeds are being planted and cultivated. Seeds are flying everywhere in these early essays!

What surprises me the most about this book is how much it illuminates the sweep of all of Merton's oeuvre, the way in which these "early essays" reflect Merton's consistent, living voice. Using 1948 for anchoring these essays in relation to his autobiography, imagine Merton just ten years before – 1938 – writing his master's thesis on William Blake, concluding that Blake cannot be understood using the analytical tools of his era (rationalism, materialism) because he worked in an intellectual climate akin to the saints.² Merton, like Blake, could also see a world in a grain of sand. In 1958, Merton had his Fourth & Walnut experience,³ but he had been enlightened one week prior, tapped open by Gabriel Marcel's helpful distinction between obedience (to external authority) and fidelity (to internal authority, the one inside a grain of sand) (SS 179-81). When his world opened, the world responded by opening in Louisville. Then, in 1968, a few months before he left this grainy world, he wrote in his Alaskan journal that what he had been working on all of his life – the contemplative nature of life itself – was "really simple openness to God at every moment." And then he added: "It just means a deep realization in the very depths of our being that God has chosen and loved us from all eternity, that we really are His children and we really are loved by Him, that there really is a personal bond and He really is present. This is so

2. See Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981), Appendix I: "Nature and Art in William Blake" (385-453).

3. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82 [3/19/1958]; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.

simple that there is no need to make a commotion about it.”⁴

Merton’s early essays are *really just that simple*. And best read without commotion.

Gray Matthews

The Letters of Robert Giroux and Thomas Merton, edited by Patrick Samway, SJ, with a Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), pp. x + 397. ISBN 978-0-268-01786-6 (paper) \$29.

As with most epistolary adventures between famous individuals, readers get a greater glimpse of the tone and tenor of an ongoing relationship than mere biography can provide. The friendship between Thomas Merton and his editor and publisher Robert Giroux is a case in point. These two men, central to the American Catholic literary renaissance of the twentieth century, provide a fascinating history of the challenges both of them faced in their respective roles as celebrated Trappist writer and renowned publisher. In their correspondence one not only sees the ups and downs of their deep friendship for one another, but also finds a portal into the many important social, political and religious moments of the last century, especially during the exciting early years of the Second Vatican Council. The editor, Patrick Samway, does a fine job of carefully editing their correspondence so that one gets the measure of each of them, whether it be Merton’s struggle with the censors of his Trappist Order or Giroux’s struggle to maintain his personal and professional equilibrium with his famous friend. Through it all, though, we see the affectionate regard that both men had for each other.

Samway begins with a helpful introductory discussion summarizing the history of this friendship and their parallel journeys as writer and publisher: Merton and Giroux as college classmates at Columbia University and the influence upon them of a small cadre of friends and professors, including their English professor, Mark Van Doren; Merton’s decision to enter religious life as Brother Louis at the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky; Giroux’s rise as a publisher first with Harcourt, Brace and eventually at Farrar, Straus & Cudahy (later Farrar, Straus & Giroux); the play-by-play of getting *The Seven Storey Mountain* published, and the autobiography’s incredible sensation with the general public; Giroux’s growing fame as publisher to some of the great names of American arts and letters – T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Flannery

4. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 143-44.