
David D. Cooper

**THOMAS MERTON'S ART OF DENIAL:
The Evolution of a Radical Humanist**

Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989
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Reviewed by **Ross Labrie**

There seem to be two kinds of books and articles about Thomas Merton, the one anecdotal, personal, and sometimes pious, the other analytical, scholarly, and generally more objective in tone. David Cooper's *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* belongs distinctly in the second category. Unlike much of the mind-numbing prose that has come out of academia in recent years, however, his study is not only carefully researched and judiciously considered but a pleasure to read. While the book is primarily a biographical study, it covers a good deal of Merton's writing, and is often informative about this writing, especially regarding the history of Merton's thinking about art and religion. As a biographer, Cooper is particularly persuasive in revealing the psychological meaning underlying Merton's eulogistic memories of his father.

Cooper's central thesis is that, because of dialectical forces embedded in Merton's personal history and psyche, he changed gradually from an ascetic with a hostile view of the modern world to a Christian humanist who finally accepted the idea that Christian awareness, even emanating from a monk such as he, not only could but should be incorporated into contemporary culture. Cooper's analysis includes an epilogue in which he sets forth the ideas of psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, to explain Merton's need to restructure his identity at various periods of his life, usually producing some innovative writing as a creative windfall in these otherwise difficult periods. The restructuring of identity characteristically involved a collision between "negative identity fragments" remaining from previous "developmental stages" and "positive identity elements" which related to the person he was on the way to becoming. While the framework of Erikson's ideas does not surface in detail until the end, it seems evident to

the reader in retrospect that they helped Cooper to organize his thinking about Merton's life throughout the study.

The advantage of using someone like Erikson is that his analyses clarify our understanding of what has surely been one of the most paradoxical and complex minds of recent intellectual and religious history. An implicit disadvantage of such an approach is the danger of reductive thinking, a risk that Cooper tries carefully to avoid by merely appending Erikson's views to a study that focuses primarily on Merton's own life and words. Nevertheless, there are times when one feels one's vision of Merton narrowed by Cooper's adopting of the Erikson analysis — as, for example, in Cooper's rather negative view of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas*: "A book like *The Sign of Jonas*," Cooper writes, "excluding its headnotes and epilogue and its rare moments of extrospection — reveals a man whose wings are clipped by his apophatic spirituality, his vision frequently clouded by life at Gethsemani closing in on him."

Such a view seems to me to lead to an undervaluing of Merton's writing at this time. While it is true that Merton himself turned his back on the isolationism and clericalism that characterized his early writings, these writings are evocative reminders of the turbulence of youth and of the drama of the individual soul on a journey to God. In addition, in spite of some of the ecclesiastical platitudinizing, both *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Sign of Jonas* are powerful examples of Merton's literary skill, a matter that, although it is not Cooper's primary concern, might have received more attention. Cooper spends a good deal of time analyzing Merton's *Cables to the Ace*, for instance, as an example of Merton's experimentalism following an identity shift, but it is worth pointing out that, as art, *Cables to the Ace* is arguably inferior both to *The Seven Storey Mountain* and to *The Sign of Jonas*. While, in other words, Merton may have moved through the patterns of growth described by Cooper, the words negative and positive as applied both to Merton's psychological growth and to the classical modes of contemplative thought, do not necessarily reflect an aesthetic ascent.

The matter comes up again and again. In connection with Merton's poetry of the late 1940s and early 1950s, for example, Cooper writes that the writing "was stunted by a poetics of negation." Similarly, in connection with *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1948) and *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (1949), Cooper believes that whether "denying human companionship, renouncing the claims of sense impressions, or condemning the ethos of secular civilization, Merton's poetics of denial produced, above all else,

a series of poems which comment on their own impotence." The reason, Cooper believes, arose from Merton's internal division whereby the contemplative and writer were engaged in ceaseless combat with each other so that the poems read more like "laments on Merton's distrust of language than as meditations on prayer, solitude, and the contemplative life." That Merton was so divided there can be no doubt. Nonetheless, the early poetry itself is often successful as poetry in conveying the spiritual beauty of contemplative solitude and what I have elsewhere called the mood of "celibate joy." Furthermore, it is noteworthy that two of the poems in *Tears of the Blind Lions* shared the Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize for 1949. Indeed, many readers, including Wendell Berry, with whom I discussed the matter some years ago, prefer the poems written before Merton turned his poetry over to social criticism in the 1960s.

The problem which Merton faced in attempting to reconcile his dual vocation as contemplative and writer is sensitively dealt with by Cooper, who quotes liberally from Merton's writings at different points during his life. Essentially, Cooper argues, the issue was decided when Merton conceded that he would never be a mystic and when coincidentally he became interested in the relationship between his views as a religious thinker about the moral state of modern society. Cooper is especially illuminating in showing the relationship between the development of Merton's central ideas in the 1960s and his debt to writers like Erich Fromm, Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and Herbert Marcuse.

Cooper is most effective in tracing the changes in Merton's understanding, which led him eventually to accept the possibility that "art could play an important role in the growth of a more integrated man." Nevertheless, while developing into a Christian humanist, Merton did not necessarily deal successfully — on an intellectual level at any rate — with his old problem of the role of art in the contemplative life. It was not so much that he did not become the mystic he would, according to Cooper, have liked to become. Rather, it was that the contemplative life itself was inevitably disturbed by the artist's excitement in seizing upon the artistic possibilities of thoughts and images which entered the contemplative's head. In retrospect it would seem that the artist in Merton was indeed irrepressible but that Merton came to see that the artist in him did have his uses — to the world — if not to the frustrated mystic. At the same time, while Merton came to regret his earlier alienation from the larger society around him, he continued to show, as Cooper parenthetically concedes, an interest in the contemplative life in his writings throughout the 1960s. In other words the

contemplative calling, which had attracted him into the Trappist Order in the first place, continued to attract him up until his death in 1968 — even if certain aspects of his earlier attitudes were later abandoned.

For this reason it is salutary to bear in mind that even if, as Cooper rightly argues, Merton arrived at a Christian humanism "relevant to modern realities," an important part of that relevance relates to his writings about the universal need for contemplative solitude. In particular, as Merton wrote to Daniel Berrigan, if the Christian was correct in confronting secular powers on significant moral issues, the Christian activist must prior to such action, withdraw for a time from organizing protest in order to bury himself in the mind of God. This was not only Christian but monastic humanism — of a sort which only a cenobite who had separated himself from the world could articulate.

I should not like these modest reservations about Cooper's book to cast a shadow over it. Compared with the many books which have been published about Merton in recent years, I would say that this is one of the strongest and most original both in conception and structuring. Thomas Merton is one of the most mercurial and elusive figures, both in his life and in his writings, to have emerged in this century. That Cooper's book throws a fresh and distinctive light on Merton there can be no doubt.

Anthony T. Padovano

CONSCIENCE & CONFLICT:

A Trilogy of One-Actor Plays:

Thomas Merton, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther

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xii, 102 pages — \$7.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Richard Moir**

I found *Conscience & Conflict* by Anthony Padovano an inspiration. As an actor with the desire for what might be described as a "theater of the spirit," I have found that this trilogy of one-actor plays achieves what all