

Yallop's strange admixture of reportage and dramatic reconstruction may make for effective docudrama but it cannot possibly contribute to the necessary redressing he calls for, unless we can be led to believe that what is argued is more fact than fiction, more the stuff of history than fantasy. . . . We can share his anger and his moral outrage but we need more than passion: we need a cogent, well-documented argument. Otherwise we have unsubstantiated charges, evidence that is at best circumstantial.<sup>2</sup>

It is not enough to channel one's outrage by focusing on nameless villains – CIA operatives – or now deceased players – Griffin, Mott, Hart and Burns – to support a thesis of collusion, conspiracy and cover-up. And to call Merton's death a martyrdom is to validate specious reasoning desperate for confirmation.

In the end, Turley and Martin have written a not negligible contribution to the literature around Merton's death – and by highlighting many of the mistakes and discrepancies around the official Thai, U.S. embassy and abbatial records, as well as conflicting witness testimony by those in attendance at the conference, they have ensured that “controversial” or “contentious” are appropriate adjectives in defining the circumstances around Merton's death. But by ascribing motives behind the actions, foibles and fumbles of many of the principal players, motives that are insidious if not pernicious, the Turley/Martin team profoundly weaken their argument. In the end, they have written a polemic – inelegant in much of its phrasing and ploddingly repetitive – that is yet another symptom of the Steve Bannon, Alex Jones, Donald Trump era.

Michael W. Higgins

FINLEY, James, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere – 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Nore Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 2018), pp. xxvi + 128. ISBN 978-0-87793-041-9 (paper) \$16.95.

Much like the work of Thomas Merton, James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* has an aura of timelessness. As the book now celebrates forty years of existence, its contemplative heartbeat and inward focus serve an ever-important need in a world that continues to hinder the individual by obsessing over the outer experience at the expense of the inner.

Without even knowing it, I've lived just a few blocks away from James Finley in the Santa Monica area of southern California for the

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2. Michael W. Higgins, “Rev. of *In God's Name* by David Yallop,” *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1989) 204-205.

last five years. But it wasn't until the summer of 2018 that I had the honor of sitting down with him for a chat, on the fortieth anniversary of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* and nearly fifty years after the death of his friend and former novice master, Thomas Merton. To describe what being in the presence of Finley was like, I echo the words Henri Nouwen uses to describe Thomas Merton in his Foreword to *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*: "He was one of us" (vii). Being in Finley's company was like a homecoming. He is a man steeped in the present moment and deeply bound to the truths of which he speaks.

*Merton's Palace of Nowhere* was my introduction to the work of James Finley. I first came across this popular book in 2013, while on retreat at St. Benedict's Abbey, the Trappist monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. Taken aback by the paradoxical title, knowing nothing about Finley, but being interested in Merton, I took hold of the book, unaware of the journey I *so* needed on which it would take me.

"In prayer," writes Finley, "we sit and we are lost before we begin. Prayer appears before us as a kind of palace with no doors" (xvii). In this great *nowhere* which Finley writes of as a place of unveiling and self-exploration, prayer is the beginning. "This book is a series of prayerful explorations," notes Finley, and "an attempt to pass on a gift that I received during some six years as a monk at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani" (xv). This beginning point of prayer and paradox is addressed time and time again, including the "combination of Merton's life in the hermitage and his growing concern for the problems of the world" (21) and the many ways one encounters paradox in spirituality and navigation of the true self. As Finley suggests, "It is the paradox that true solitude draws us into communion with others and true communion with others draws us into solitude. His [Merton's] vocation was to find others in solitude" (21). If the path of this book is made with prayers, then the feet walking upon the book are the feet which Finley gently and boldly guides in what feels like a brand new deep-dive into the concepts of the true and the false self. One could come to the book as a beginner or well-read student of the concepts, and without a doubt leave renewed, refreshed and with a deeper (though it may be wordless) understanding of specific meanings for their own lives.

Split into multiple sections spanning the enduring study of these topics, the book also explores the foundational aspects of the false self, the religious searching of the true self, and numerous insights found along the way. Layered throughout the book, one will find countless stories that humanize Merton as a novice master and fellow human.

Finley shares personal stories about what Merton taught him about prayer, the life of a monk, the concept of the true self – all of which Finley has brought to his work as a writer, clinical psychologist, spiritual director and retreat leader.

The relevancy of Thomas Merton's work more than fifty years later is similar to the relevancy of James Finley's now, just over forty years later. Finley shares first-hand stories of Merton bumping up against the censors of the Order who had "rejected those parts of his *Seeds of Destruction* dealing with atomic warfare" (21), and he goes on to offer an understanding of what it means to express one's true self in the world which will undoubtedly continue to cause us to flail in a sea of chaos, injustices and war. "The prophetic dimension of the contemplative's role (or non-role) in society," writes Finley, "is to a great extent grounded in the contemplative's refusal to embrace the world as a god that gives meaning to life without first accepting and receiving life from God" (28). Amid this everlasting lesson, it seems Finley points the reader to the true self as the meeting place for being able to emerge and face this world's perpetual stream of hatred and injustices.

"We give God a name," Finley proclaims in his chapter called "The True Self in Religious Searching" (35-58). "We then equate God with the name we have given him, and in doing so we make ourselves, in effect, God's God. Instead of acknowledging God as the source of our identity and existence, we make ourselves the self-proclaimed source of God's identity" (42). As a queer woman, I appreciate Finley's approach not only to unpacking the Mertonian concepts of the "true self" and "false self" but also to the ways in which we box in God *and* ourselves by way of using language. It seems to me that Finley is pointing to a place *beyond* words, a space big enough to host the *whole* of mystery, a setting welcoming *all* of our true selves at the table. The spaciousness with which Finley expresses these ideas leaves the reader with a glimpse of infinite possibility, "no longer contained in the confining perimeters of questions and answers" (101), guiding the reader into a region with enough room to navigate *their own way* and to seek *their own* ultimate identity in their true self.

Because the nature of Finley's book is essentially that of a spiritual guide, the book could easily be used as retreat reading, no matter where in their spiritual progress retreatants may find themselves. In discussing lessons he and his fellow novices learned while working with Thomas Merton, Finley relates them with an immediacy that makes readers feel as if we are learning along with them. One example is of the time they were helping to put out a neighboring farmer's fire, an

experience in which Finley was struck by the incongruous nature of prayer. As they heard the Angelus bells ringing in the distance, Merton stopped the firefighting group and called out, “Stop, let’s all say the Angelus!” While Finley was amused by the idea, he also recognized its underlying message: “Unless we are willing to knuckle down before the flames we will never truly pray” (86-87).

Overall, the book is a kind of balance beam of remembering. The normalcy of Finley’s experience of Merton and his time at Gethsemani points the reader to who *we* really are – *not* “some other poet, some other saint,” as Merton might say.<sup>3</sup> “Contemplation is nothing less than that surrender,” writes Finley, “that abandon, that letting go of self to love in order to realize a deeper self born of love” (67). On this path of finding and embracing that deeper self, we often somehow find that we are simultaneously *nothing and everything*. We are *whole and we are broken*. We are *in darkness and we are in light*. Yet, God remains in the silent places – unmoved. And on this path to finding our deepest selves, we are often faced with *what or where* to really begin – where do we go amid the silences? Finley, I think, would appropriately point the reader once again to prayer: “Merton once remarked that the Church and the world do not need people to talk about prayer, think about prayer or write about prayer nearly as much as they need people to pray. Until we go to pray there is no prayer” (87).

Re-reading this important book over the last couple of years was a brand-new experience for me. Nearly six years after my first reading, I was once again left awestruck by the possibilities of continuing to heed the true self in all aspects of my life. *Merton’s Place of Nowhere* is a necessary book for spiritual seekers in every step of life – lost or found, full of faith or full of doubt – ready to meet their truest and deepest selves, *ready for wholeness*. Of all the books on Merton I’ve read over the years, this one continues to find its way to the top of the pile, exactly where it belongs.

Cassidy Hall

SWEENEY, Jon M., ed., *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018), pp. xvii + 197. ISBN 978-1-59471-741-3 (paper) \$16.95.

[I]f you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living

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3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 98.