

A REVIEW

THOMAS MERTON: PILGRIM IN PROCESS
 Edited by Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins
 (Toronto : Griffin House, 1983)

Reviewed by

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The growing Merton public owes several debts of gratitude to Dr. Michael W. Higgins and Dr. Donald Grayston. In May of 1978 these two men - surely the leading representatives of Merton scholarship in Canada - cooperated in organizing at Vancouver, British Columbia, a Symposium commemorating the tenth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. This Symposium (together with a similar one held at Columbia University later the same year) may be said to have marked a turning point in Merton studies. Scholars, who theretofore had worked more or less in isolation, experienced a sense of solidarity, even community, in a common endeavor. Or to put it another way, after Vancouver Merton's works ceased to be almost exclusively the hunting grounds of graduate students in search of a likely topic for a dissertation. Merton scholarship began to acquire a character and a respectability of its own.

The publication of THOMAS MERTON: PILGRIM IN PROCESS, which brings together a judicious selection of the papers delivered at Vancouver (other papers from the Symposium have already appeared in THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS MERTON, Cistercian Publications) places us further in debt to these two Canadian scholars.

The papers here reproduced offer a representative look at the range of topics discussed at the Symposium. Eleven papers (introduced by a prologue and followed by an epilogue and an appendix) are grouped in three categories: (1) Man of Letters, (2) Theologian and Contemplative, and (3) Pilgrim of the Future. These three categories are tied together by the general title of the book: PILGRIM IN PROCESS. The title is well chosen as a description both of the thrust of the articles and of the life of the man who is their subject. For Merton's story is the story of Merton becoming Merton, but never fully. Donald Grayston, in his article on THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN, captures the meaning of the title when he describes THE MOUNTAIN as "the first phase of Merton's epectasis." "Epectasis," a term borrowed from



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Gregory of Nyssa via Philippians 3:12, means journeying though never arriving, yet always with the eager longing to arrive. The more Merton came through experience to know God and to discover people in God, the more his capacity was enlarged and the more he desired to enter further into the mystery of God and His people.

Part I (“Man of Letters”) includes a study of Merton’s understanding of art and the artist’s role in society (Ross Labrie), two approaches to his poetry (Michael Higgins’ thoughtful study which centers Merton’s quest for integration around three principal metaphors which he finds progressively revealed in the poetry, namely, the window, the tower and the circle; Sr. Therese Lentfoehr’s reflections on Zen poems of Merton which show him moving toward ever greater simplicity in articulating the inner experience), and, finally, a comparison of Merton with two contemporary writers: one with whom he shared a common view of reality (Flannery O’Connor) and one with whom he did not (Wallace Stevens).

Central to Part II (“Theologian and Contemplative”) is the article on “Merton and Identity” (Nicholls and Kent) which explores both what Merton had to say about identity (a principal theme in his later writings) and his own efforts to achieve his personal identity by transcending the ego-self and achieving a high degree of openness, love and creativity. Donald Grayston examines THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN, Merton’s first step in articulating his journey toward personal identity. Grayston describes this work as “autobiographical” or “intermediary” theology and sees its on-going appeal as evidence that Merton was not just a religious man, but a *modern* religious man.

Edward K. Kaplan compares and contrasts Merton and the contemporary Jewish mystic and prophet, Abraham Heschel. An added bonus to his fine article is the inclusion of the Merton-Heschel correspondence. I would, however, want to question Dr. Kaplan’s assertion that Merton’s dialogue with Jews was appreciably more low-key than with other religious traditions. When the Merton correspondence is published, his letters to other Jewish writers and thinkers will place his dialogue with Judaism in better perspective.

Kenneth Russell examines a somewhat vexing problem: the curious fact that, despite his enthusiastic plea for contemplation, Merton offers little in the way of concrete guidelines for would-be lay contemplatives. Yet the paradox is that his contemplative witness attracted them and they were able to translate what he had to say into terms more congenial to their own way of life.

Part III (“Pilgrim of the Future”) addresses Merton’s views on two issues that we have been called upon to face for the first time in human history: the threat of nuclear war (Gordon Zahn) and the challenge in an ever shrinking world to look beyond ourselves and our separate cultures in order to achieve a transcultural consciousness (William M. Thompson).

In addition to the eleven articles, there is as a prologue Herbert O’Driscoll’s radio documentary on Merton’s life, and as an epilogue the brief but moving talk of Amiya Chakravarty, Merton’s close Hindu friend.

An appendix explains how Evelyn Waugh “cut” THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN for its publication in England as ELECTED SILENCE. The editors might well have added an explanation of the “cutting” done by the American publishers, the elimination of much that was banal and overly pietistic - a “cutting” which Merton himself agreed had to be done. A comparison of the original manuscript with the final American edition shows that this “cutting” was probably crucial in making THE MOUNTAIN a best-seller.

I would offer a closing reflection occasioned by the publication of PILGRIM IN PROCESS. We have had a number of fine books of *short* articles on Thomas Merton. Perhaps the time has come to move toward more detailed, full-length, critical studies of the many works that Merton produced. For a starter, since 1983 is the thirty-fifth anniversary of the publication of THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN, is there any one out there prepared to do a full-length critical edition of this perhaps most seminal of all his works?