

A SCHOLARLY “GOOD READ”

Review of

David D. Cooper

*THOMAS MERTON'S ART OF DENIAL:
THE EVOLUTION OF A RADICAL HUMANIST*
Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989
xiv, 304 pages / \$35.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **Paul Ruttle**, C. P.

Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist is a critical and interpretive study of Thomas Merton's life and writings. It is an important book. This study explains the various tensions in the life of America's most famous monk, better than any other book to date. It may well become the definitive work concerning Merton's own struggle with being a monk / artist while living in a severe monastic life in the twentieth century.

So much that has been written about Merton has been uncritical even to the point of bordering on hagiography. It is, therefore, all the more refreshing to see a keen critical eye cast upon the Merton corpus. Cooper's criticism of Merton's writings is brilliant and forthright. It would be difficult to fault this book for its uncompromising honesty and I certainly will not.

Cooper's interpretation of Merton's life may be considered somewhat controversial by some but it is never less than respectful. I did not always agree with his interpretations but they are carefully crafted and clearly reasoned arguments that challenge the reader's own interpretations of Merton's life and inner struggles.

Despite its rather scholarly title this book is very readable. Because it is so well written the author is able to capture the tremendous breadth of Merton's writing and blend it with his own insightful commentary. Writers such as Marx, Camus, Feuerback, Bonhoeffer, Fromm, Erikson and Marcuse, are just a few of the modern thinkers who exercised an influence on the thought of Thomas Merton. Cooper not only notes these influences but he also analyzes the reasons why a person had an influence on Merton. Put in the context of Merton's life history

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and experiences and the history of the time in which Merton wrote, this analysis helps the reader appreciate and understand how Merton grew as a person and as a writer / artist.

The book is written in two parts: I. The Crisis of the Missing Years and, II. A Radical Humanist and the Radical Critique. Cooper adds a section to the end of Part II which he entitles: "Young Man Merton: A Speculative Epilogue." This epilogue is really a brief and interesting psychobiography similar to Erik Erickson's well-known *Young Man Luther*.

In Part I, Cooper considers Merton's personal history and his need to deny certain aspects of that history. For example, the whole struggle in Merton's life between being a monk and being a writer necessitated the need for Merton initially to deny the artist within himself. Such denial also affected his relationship with his father. It would seem that Merton, who was unfailingly honest in writing about himself, engaged in more than a little hagiography when it came to his own father. He steadfastly denied that his father was a failure as a father while at the same time constantly overrating him as a much greater artist than he actually was. This struggle between art and religion, artist and monk, would play itself out not only in how Merton remembered his father, but also in a unique almost archetypical way in his relationship with his spiritual father, the Abbot of Gethsemani, Dom James Fox.

The full scope and fury of the tensions that Merton was experiencing during this period in his life can be found in *The Sign of Jonas*. In Merton's life, crisis was occasion for creativity. In this case these creative tensions gave birth to the stunningly beautiful epilogue of the book — "Fire Watch." The epilogue, in particular, and in a sense the whole book, provides a fascinating backdrop to and measure of Merton's personal tensions within himself, his trouble with Cistercian censors and publishers, and even his struggle to become a hermit. "*Sign of Jonas* is the journal of the so called missing years" and, in light of Cooper's analysis, this journal becomes an invitation to the reader to consider that Merton was not always the victim of circumstance that he so often portrayed himself to be.

It is in the careful analysis of still another Merton work, *Art and Worship*, that the author is able creatively to take stock of what these various criticisms of denial really mean to the development and growth of Thomas Merton. *Art and Worship*, having taken Merton some ten years to write with numerous major revisions, is the perfect key to understanding Merton's evolving attitudes and ideas. Cooper is quite correct in pointing out that *Art and Worship* may well have failed as an art book but that it succeeds brilliantly as biography.

Cooper uses Merton's friendship with two artists — Ad Reinhardt, an abstract expressionist, and Victor Hammer, a confirmed classicist — to provide the reader with an interesting little digression on the whole topic of art. Merton was unable to ease the tension in the opposing views of his two friends. He was, however, able to maintain their friendship and also to accommodate this tension in his own thought. In Cooper's words, Merton "eventually grew large enough to contain it." Such is the role that crisis and tension would constantly play in Merton's life.

Part II traces the incredible journey that led Merton from a biblical self-image as Jonas riding through life in the belly of a whale to a modern, post-Christian self-image as a guilty bystander to the sufferings of the world. Put another way, in the words of one of Merton's friends, it is an examination of how Merton went from "wearing a cowl to wearing blue jeans." This shift in perspective which led to a new self-image was not only spiritual and literary but also existential. Cooper helps the reader weave through Merton's reading of Boris Pasternak, Reza Arasteh, and Albert Camus. Armed with new ideas of the artist as revolutionary and the artist as rebel, Merton began to take on social issues with a passion and even to enter into the "international situation" without the former identity crisis (monk / writer) that usurped so much of his psychic energy. Merton no longer needed to practice his "art of denial." There is even a very interesting section

on Merton's engagement of the Death of God Theology.

Finally, it is in "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" that Merton's acceptance of modernity came clean. Here his humanism and his critique became truly radical. His poetry became a poetry of dissent and eventually evolved into anti-poetry. So taken with the power of language, Merton even engaged in an early form of criticism of what we would call today "double-speak." With his criticism of language, Merton has finally traversed the distance from salvation *from* the world (the ideal of the young monk) to salvation *of* the world (the obsession of the secular hermit). While his humanism was eminently practical, Cooper points out that it was constructed from the traditional theological justifications of: the concept of redemptive love and its empowering doctrine of the Incarnation; a New Testament theology stressing the primacy of the human person over the claims of legalistic religion; and the mandate of forgiveness fundamental to Christian ethical standards.

It is difficult to situate this book among the veritable flood of books written about Merton. At times it can be demanding of the reader. The depth of the criticism and interpretation would indicate that this book would appeal to those who have a fairly good acquaintance with the details of Merton's life and, at least, a working knowledge of his writings. Nonetheless this book is so well written that even a newcomer to Merton could benefit greatly from it. In the final analysis, it is that most rare of all gems: a book that is both scholarly and "a good read."

J. S. PORTER Replies To
PATRICK F. O'CONNELL'S Review of *THE THOMAS MERTON POEMS*
("A Caravan for Merton," *Merton Seasonal*, Summer 1989)

Professor O'Connell's review of my book is generous, even gracious. I thank him sincerely, for example, for his perceptive recognition of the recurrent amphibian metaphor, which he terms a "master image," as I think the metaphor is a useful way to "get at" aspects of Merton's complex life and character.

May I, however, quarrel gently with his apparent unease with the documentary poetic form, with my "becoming" Merton. In the Canadian poetic tradition it is not unusual to engage in "the daring and risky strategy" of becoming someone else, of donning a mask and speaking through it. Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Modie*, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and Gwendolyn MacEwen's *The T. E. Lawrence Poems* furnish a few examples of a form in which a poet takes on the spirit of someone else, blends research with the imagination, and dramatizes quirks of character and pivotal events in the subject's life. Although documentary poetry appears to be rare in American literature, one need not restrict oneself to Canadian literature for examples of mask wearing.

Professor O'Connell cannot be unfamiliar with the writings of Jonathan Swift in which for artistic purposes Swift pretends to be someone else — an economist and mathematician in *A Modest Proposal*, a journalist in *A Tale of the Tub*, or a nominal Christian in *Against Abolishing Christianity*. While Swift wears the masks, his own face from time to time protrudes, and however varied the narrators, the narratives bear Swift's unmistakable signature.

Interestingly, Merton himself used masks. Witness his love of aliases in letters (Wang, Home, Roosevelt, etc.), and his amazing powers of entering into someone else's point of view whether in his translations of French and Latin American poetry, in his Zen essays, in his remaking of Chuang Tzu, called "a mirror of Merton" by Abbot John Eudes Bamberger, or in his reconstruction of the sayings of the fourth century Desert Fathers. Any "translation," it seems to me, will bear the mark of the original and of the translator. The translation is not necessarily judged on its literalness, but often on its fidelity to the spirit of the original. In wearing a mask one does not remove one's own face. When a North American Indian, for instance, puts on the mask of the coyote in a ceremonial dance, he gains strength and freedom from the identification, but neither he nor those who watch suffer from the illusion that he is a coyote.

I could go on, but more specific rebuttals might be considered bad manners for I am very grateful for Professor O'Connell's serious and insightful attention to the book and his, on the whole, balanced and judicious appraisal of it.