

MERTON'S OWN AUTHENTIC VOICE OF THE MOMENT

Review of
Thomas Merton
The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers
Selected and Edited by Christine M. Bochen
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993
xiv, 314 pages/\$25.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **George Kilcourse**

Less than two years after he began exchanging letters with the Polish poet, former diplomat, and writer Czeslaw Milosz, Thomas Merton unwittingly named his own metier. In a lengthy May 16, 1960 epistle he referred to the manuscript of his own "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude": "I do not say it represents much but it is my own authentic voice of the moment . . ." This fourth volume in the projected five volume series of Merton's selected correspondence surpasses its predecessors because it articulates better this very freedom of his "own authentic voice of the moment" as spoken to his literary peers. The fact that so many of the letters are addressed to fellow poets undoubtedly relaxed Merton's voice. The immediacy of these honest, searching, implied dialogues almost suggests a form of mutual spiritual direction. Here the unadulterized, transparent Merton is revealed through a genre that rivals and in some ways surpasses the autobiographical journals because these letters are directed to particular persons and especially kindred spirits.

There is just such a distinction found buried in the early pages of *The Courage for Truth*. A 1962 letter exchanged with Jacques Maritain finds Merton cautioning his philosopher-friend against publishing for the general public his recently deceased wife, Raissa's, journals in their entirety. His fear is that such an intimate genre would be received with "flippant respect: because of people's fear, a fear he says "mocks their own inner light and beauty." Three years later he writes to Maritain after having read his fellow French-born friend's published "notebooks" [Merton uses the French word *carnets*]. He confesses that his own just-finished work, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, "is itself a kind of *carnet* (rather than a journal) but with quite a lot of poetic descriptive stuff too." All of which conjures up for Merton scholars and aficionados a new hermeneutical question: What is the autobiographical gravitas of these various genres—journal, correspondence, diary, working



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Photo by George B. Frye III

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notebooks, prose poem, lyric essay, and poetry? And how equivocal are we (and is Merton) in using these designations? With the project of publishing volumes of Merton's journals now underway as a sequel to the correspondence, these questions will grow in importance. (Can the publication of Merton's working notebooks be far behind?)

As with the selection of correspondents for the previous volumes in this series—*The Hidden Ground of Love*, *The Road to Joy*, and *The School of Charity*—both the unevenness in the pitch of Merton's voice and the varying degrees of intimacy (or the lack thereof) is much in evidence in these letters spanning two decades of the monk's history. With Evelyn Waugh, the first correspondent in this volume, Merton writes unashamedly in awe of a celebrity author. The Jacques Maritain letters are alive with spiritual resonance, although again Merton's reverence for the elder philosopher keeps him at some distance. He postures for the author of *The Peasant of Garonne* with sometimes exaggerated complaints about liturgical reforms, but more deeply laments with him the loss of connection between contemplation and liturgy.

It is with the letters to Milosz that this volume graduates to Merton's "own authentic voice of the moment." They are followed by and echo selections from Merton's previously published and much appreciated letters to the Soviet poet and novelist, Boris Pasternak. In the longest and most sustained series of letters, a pivotal nine year exchange with his former novice, the Nicaraguan poet and later liberation theologian, Ernesto Cardenal, the multifaceted identity of Merton blossoms. With Chilean antipoet Nicanor Parra, Nicaraguan poet and editor Pablo Antonio Cuadra, and New York musicologist and poet Louis Zukofsky, Merton's confidence gains momentum. In my judgment, he confides to each poet a dimension of his spiritual self and soul like nowhere else in his canon of writings. To a lesser extent, the smaller selection of his letters to Latin Americans Alceu Amoroso Lima, Napoleon Chow, Alfonso Cortes, Miguel Grinberg, Angel Martinez, Ludovico Silva, Alejandro Vignati, Esther de Caceres, Jose Coronel Urtecho, Hernan Lavin Cerda, Victoria Ocampo, Rafael Squirru, and Cintio Vitier add harmony to the chorus as lesser but significant confidants. In their own right, Merton's letters to United States writers Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Henry Miller, and Walker Percy add important nuances in addressing how the religious imagination speaks to a United States culture which Merton chastises at various points as a disillusioned system, totally blind, and headed toward fascist violence and becoming a police state dictatorship.

I have discovered a strategy for interpreting these letters to writers which I suggest other readers might employ to gain access to Merton's wisdom. It involves tracking four essential themes juggled throughout Merton's exchanges with his correspondents: (1) his self-identity as poet; (2) his understanding of monasticism (and the church); (3) his affinity for Latin America vis-a-vis his diagnosis of the bankrupt United States pseudo-culture; and (4) his definition of religion for a post-Christian world. The nexus of truth weaving throughout these familiar mertonian themes gains sharp focus through his "own authentic voice of the moment" in these epistles where the monk wrestles with his own vulnerability. He resurrects the resources of faith that summon him to poetry and the creative "literary criticism" which Milosz urged him to contribute by reading Camus. In doing so, Merton reappraises what he calls the "pious journalism" of some of his earlier writing. On the one hand he can complain of being nauseated by the "petty" optimism "which cheapens Christianity and makes it absurd, empties it." This goes hand-in-hand with what he criticizes as the American ideal of having no more questions and all the "right answers."

A March 28, 1961 letter to Milosz provides a center of gravity in the struggle which challenges Merton, on the other hand, to "ripen" his own future writing. All four themes I have identified converge in his opening admission: "We always seek to evade the expression of what is most important to us, in fact we are usually not able even to confront it." Merton goes on to admit the confusion around him and in his own self. These "same poisons . . . and same ambiguities" are not confined to the world, he admits. The poet resonates with Milosz's metaphor of the "spellbound dance of paralytics" to describe our obsession with a "fog" of

concepts, knowledge, and techniques to address “illusory answers to illusory problems.” The sapiential Merton looms large in these letters. Foreshadowings of Merton the anti-poet appear in his critique voiced after a rare glance at TV and a commercial that confirmed for him our zombie status: “two little figures were dancing around worshipping a roll of toilet paper, chanting a hymn in its honor . . . We have simply lost the ability to see what is right in front of us.”

Having suggested a path through *The Courage for Truth* with four themes I have identified, let me give an illustration of each. Readers will be able to amplify each theme with other gems mined from the veins running through these letters.

(1) **Merton’s self identity as poet:** He writes in 1964 to Henry Miller that “My best books are the ones nobody reads . . . [F]ew are buying the poems.” Three years later he writes to Louis Zukofsky and, while admitting that this musicologist-poet might join other readers in finding *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* “too quarrelsome,” he turns to his work on *The Geography of Lograire* with enthusiasm: “I have fallen head first into a long poem of my own, swimming in its craziness, and trying other work and just walking in the sun . . . There is always the deep inner richness of a silence that comes up and meets and merges with the sunlight from the outside and all is one sun so who cares about whether work is done? Then the work does itself in its own freedom.”

(2) **Merton’s understanding of monasticism (and the church):** He writes to Margaret Randall from his hermitage in 1967 and describes it as “the kind of compromise with life that I have ended up with.” Yet at the same time he refuses “to be always justifying the monk idea” because it leads him to “the false idea that I am a monk.” No sooner having said this, Merton admits that it is nonetheless “a delusion” to say that he had “copped out of the monastic institution.” In more positive terms, he speaks of his monastic identity along the lines of this introduction to the Japanese translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in a 1965 letter to Milosz: “I think the monastic way of life is a life of liberation from movements”; it echoes in his 1967 remark to Walker Percy, commenting on the ecumenical “movement”: “All movements fill me either with suspicion or lassitude. But I enjoy talking to people (except about movements). I think the best thing is to belong to a universal anti-movement underground.”

(3) **Merton’s affinity for Latin America:** Perhaps no other theme is so dominant in these letters, given the preponderance of Latin American correspondents included in this collection. Merton writes in 1965 to Ludovico Silva about some translations of his poetry: “I always like my stuff better in Spanish than in English . . . I have always told Ernesto [Cardenal] and others than I feel more a part of the scene in Spanish American poetry than in the North American field, where I am a bramble among the flowers.” While Merton’s letters to Cardenal are valuable in their own right, giving us the voice of a spiritual director as his former novice approaches ordination, they also trace the monk’s aborted efforts to leave Gethsemani and eventually redefine his monastic identity (the theme above). But he writes to Cardenal as early as 1961, thanking him for being such a fine translator of his poems: “Reading the poems again I am once again struck by the fact that they have a life of their own in Spanish, almost as though they were destined to be in Spanish as well as in English, by a kind of nativity or *natura* within themselves.” In a prophetic cultural critique, he writes to Cardenal, poetically using the lens of a hidden wholeness through which Merton invariably saw reality: “Someday America (North, Central, and South) will perhaps be the great living unity that it was meant to be and it now is not. That will not be possible if it tries

to be the rootless culture that it now is: a sort of cancerous orchid transplanted from somewhere else.”

(4) **Merton’s definition of religion for a post-Christian world:** In his letters to Maritain, Merton alludes to Leon Bloy’s premonition of the collapse of the Christian world. In a 1963 letter to Maritain he defines the “post-Christian” world, “in the sense that it has preserved the mimicry of Christian charity and the forms of Christian order without the inner reality.” His premier example is the tragic nuclear arms race which he sees as “destined to explode . . . the final empty husk of the illusion of a Christian world.” Merton writes to Alceu Amoroso Lima in 1961 about Christianity “vanishing into an age of shadows and uncertainty.” He chides his own locale, describing the “shelter” of his monastery as a deceptive greenhouse. “And grains of error planted innocently in a well-kept greenhouse become giant poisonous trees,” he warns. His conclusion is filled with the mature Merton voice: “Our faith can no longer serve merely as a happiness pill. It has to be the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. And this it will be, for all of us who so desire.” To a seemingly unlikely correspondent, Henry Miller, Merton addresses a scorching critique of contemporary religion, calling ours “the greatest orgy of idolatry the world has ever known.” “The religion of nonreligious people tends to be clear of religious idols,” he volunteers, “and is in many ways much less pseudo. But on the other hand, they often have no defense against the totalitarian kind, which end up being bigger and worse.” Here lay the geography, the terrain, where Merton ventured his most mature explorations. We come full circle with his comment to Miller: “As a priest I ought, of course, to be able to give Christ’s answer. But unfortunately . . . it is no longer a matter of answer. It is a time perhaps of great spiritual silence.”

Editor Christine M. Bochen deserves great credit for gathering these letters into such a handsome, carefully arranged collection. Her fine general introduction and the introductions to each correspondent provide useful biographical sketches and bibliographic information (though the abundant use of Spanish titles might have been relieved with some English translations for those not fluent in Spanish). There remains the question of the ellipses in the letters, indicating material excised for editorial reasons. I recall, for example, a splendid French note which Merton penned on a letter to Maritain. He spoke of dreaming often of the Christ child, a playful meditation which he wanted to share with his philosopher friend. We will have to rely upon other scholars to harvest these important diamonds of Merton’s spirituality which are missing from the selected letters. A small blemish on an otherwise very attractive and well-executed project.