

“NEW HORIZONS FOR AN OLD JOURNEY”: *NO MAN IS AN ISLAND*, A REVIEW FORTY YEARS LATER

by **William H. Shannon**

Published in 1955, *No Man is an Island* [hereafter *NMII*] is forty years old, still in print and still being read. The title, a well known and somewhat overworked sentence taken from John Donne, hardly captures the book’s main thrust. The sense of community we all have with one another, which the title suggests, is clarified in the Prologue; and while it casts its light over the chapters of the book, it is not for all that their principal emphasis. The book is about “some basic verities on which the spiritual life depends.” (x) It is dedicated (in Latin) to the scholastics and the newly ordained priests of the monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, for whom Merton had been spiritual master. One suspects that much of it emerged from lectures given to these monks. There are times when it seems clear that Merton is talking to monks. This characteristic of some of Merton’s writings, especially the earlier works, can prove irritating to his non-monkish readers. It suggests an impatience on his part to do the proper editing that a careful writer needs to do.

Merton links *NMII* with two previous works. One was a much smaller work: a mimeographed text simply called *Sentences* [hereafter *SS*]. This work of thirty pages is made up of some 120 sentences, some that are simply sentences, others that expand into paragraphs. On 13 January 1959 Merton sent the typescript of *SS* to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, telling her that it formed the rudimentary basis for *NMII* and remarking that its short sentences were probably better than “the long-winded finished book.”

SS was completed on the feast of the Sacred Heart 1952. *NMII* was published 24 March 1955. This suggests that Merton would probably have completed the writing of the manuscript some time in 1954. Thus he had about two years to transform *SS* into *NMII*. Having read *SS*, and compared it with *NMII*, I must say that, despite Merton’s self-deprecatory statement about the book, the book is by far the better of the two documents. Even though book is by far the better of the two documents. Even though Merton mused in his letter to Sister Therese that he might some day publish *SS*, I would have to say that it would have required a great deal of rewriting before becoming publishable material. And *NMII* is that rewrite.

The other link with previous writing that Merton makes is with *Seeds of Contemplation* [hereafter *SC*], published on 2 March 1949. In the “Author’s Note” to *NMII*, Merton indicates that it is actually a sequel to *SC*, though he makes the point that instead of going on from where that book left off, he is returning to the same material, intending to make it “simpler, more fundamental, and more detailed.” (x) Incidentally, this “Author’s Note” is dated January 1955 (perhaps written after he had corrected the

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galley or the page proofs?) and is signed by Fr. M. Louis, OCSO, though the title page bears the name of Thomas Merton.

I doubt if many readers would find *NMII* “simpler” than *SC*, though they might agree that it is “more detailed.” Definitely, it is, in my opinion, “more fundamental.” In saying this, I am understanding “fundamental” to mean “foundational.” Foundational to the faith that Merton professed is “tradition” and the role it plays in giving intelligibility to that faith.

NMII presents a much more mature understanding of tradition than *SC*. In *SC* tradition seems to be something “out there,” something of a standard against which he must measure whatever he says. Thus he writes in the “Author’s Note” of *SC*: “We sincerely hope [this book] does not contain a line that is new to Catholic tradition.” (14) There is an almost disconcerting certitude treading its way through *SC*. For instance, in chapter 12, which bears the title “Tradition and Revolution,” Merton writes: “The reason why Catholic tradition is a tradition is because there is only one living doctrine in Christianity; there is nothing new to be discovered.” (84) When he calls that tradition revolutionary, he means that it opposes the values and standards of a materialistic culture. What he does not mean is that there is any revolution in the tradition itself. No, that is quite fixed. Understandably, this chapter then goes on to discuss Catholic dogma, which articulates the definitive form which that tradition takes.

NMII, by contrast, presents a quite different understanding of Catholic tradition. This man who in 1949 did not want to write “a line that would be new to Catholic tradition,” says in his 1955 book: “I do not intend to divorce myself at any point from Catholic tradition. But neither do I intend to accept points of that tradition blindly, and without understanding and without making them really my own.”(xiv) He goes on: “For it seems to me that the first real responsibility of a man [sic] of faith is to make his faith really a part of his own life, not by rationalizing it [as in *SC* perhaps?] but by living it. These are the words of a man who is no longer willing to accept pre-packaged answers that require no personal struggle. More than that he is willing to live with questions that for the time being may not admit of clear answers. This of course makes for a certain amount of insecurity. But the insecurity that accompanies a willingness to live with questions is preferable to “a far worse insecurity, which comes from being afraid to ask the right questions — because they might turn out to have no answer.” Merton paints the dark picture of people “huddling together in the pale light of an insufficient answer to a question we are afraid to ask.” (xiii)

Such words, written forty years ago, have a striking contemporary ring when we think of some of the questions the Catholic Church struggles with today. To take but one example: there is in some quarters a hope that in the future there will be a sufficient number of celibate male priests to enable the Church to continue to be a Eucharistic Church. Is this really an expression of hope or does it betray a fear that is scared to ask new questions and seek new answers? Is it, quite simply, being content with the “pale light of an insufficient answer?”

It may be said, moreover, that Merton’s perception of tradition in *NMII* was ahead of its time. This living understanding of tradition — as growing and subject to on-going scrutiny rather than statically fixed — anticipates the position that would be set forth ten years later in the Second Vatican Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*: “The God who spoke of old still maintains an uninterrupted conversation with the bride of his beloved Son. The Holy Spirit, too, is active, making the living voice of the gospel ring out in the Church, and through it in the world, leading those who believe into the whole truth, and making the message of Christ dwell in them in all its richness.” (art. 8)

Merton said it quite well in chapter 6 of *NMII*, where he writes:

Tradition, which is always old, is at the same time ever new because it is always reviving — born again in each generation, *to be lived and applied in a new and particular way . . .*

Tradition is creative. Always original, it always opens out *new horizons for an old journey* . . . [It] teaches us how to live, because it develops and expands our powers and shows us how to give ourselves to the world in which we live. (150-151, italics added)

I have spent what may seem an inordinate amount of time on Merton's changing understanding of tradition. I do this for two reasons. First and foremost, because I believe that the evolution his thinking underwent on this issue tells us a great deal about Thomas Merton. It reveals a new and more mature Merton: a man whose horizons are wider, whose vision of reality is clearer, and whose perspective on life is more balanced. Understanding this change in him is crucial for forecasting the direction his life and works would take in the years that remained. For this reason *NMII* must be seen as a key book in the Merton corpus.

I have a second reason for dwelling on a single issue. The author has chosen a literary genre which is difficult to review with any sense of completeness. Sixteen topics are discussed. All are related to the life of the spirit, but the author makes little effort to relate them to one another. The hapless reviewer finds him/herself with sixteen "small books" to review. The easiest way out is to excerpt quotes from a book in which so much is quotable. There is a lyric quality to the text. It abounds in aphorisms, clear, succinct and challenging. A few examples will suffice. "May God deliver me from the love of a friend who will never dare to rebuke me. May God Preserve me from the friend who seeks to do nothing but change and correct me." (10) "Renunciation is not an end in itself; it helps us to use things better." (34) "The real purpose of asceticism is to disclose the difference between the evil use of things, which is sin, and their good use which is virtue." (106) "There is something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness and finality." (140) A favorite of mine, touching as it does on the roots of nonviolence, is this gem: "A man [sic] of sincerity is less interested in defending the truth than it stating it clearly, for he thinks that if truth be clearly seen it can very well take care of itself." (195) And this: "The God of peace is never glorified by human violence." (197)

The temptation is to go on quoting passage after passage. At the same time, it must be said that some of the aphorisms, so beautifully articulated, cry out for further clarification. The genre in which Merton has chosen to write dispenses him from this responsibility and at times leaves the reader cliff-hanging. Furthermore, there are times when one wonders if he sometimes sacrifices clarity to cleverness — surely no small temptation for a writer whose love of words and whose intuition of the power they could wield are so obvious.

When Merton in 1967 made a chart rating his books according to these categories: Best, Better, Good, Fair, Poor, Bad, Awful, he listed none in the category of "Best," thirteen as "Better." *No Man is an Island* he classified as "Good." My inclination is to disagree with him and move it up one notch to "Better." It has survived forty years. I predict it will survive many more.