A Labor of Mutual Self-Completion

Review of
Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters
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Reviewed by Don Christopher Nugent

David Cooper, well known to us for his original if controversial *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial*, has now given us an incontrovertibly welcome addition to the increasingly massive body of *Mertoniana.* Since James Laughlin was Merton's confidant as well as publisher, their letters help fill in the emergent image of a multi-faceted and renunciant monk pursued by the spectre if not furies of literary fame. Cooper in fact sees the letters between the two as revelatory of a "remarkable labor of mutual self-completion" (xi).

Merton we know, and while 176 of the letters are from him, 40 are from Laughlin and it is time that we knew him better, too. Founding editor of New Directions, Laughlin was a year senior to Merton but, unlike him, heir to the comfort provided by the fortunes of Jones and Laughlin Steel Corporation, Pittsburgh. After Harvard, the aspiring poet studied under Ezra Pound at Rapallo, Italy, the same year as Merton's foundational experience in the churches of Rome. But if all roads did not lead to Rome, from there their two paths appear mysteriously convergent. Pound himself was more impressed with Laughlin's purse than with his poetry, and steered him in the direction of New Directions, that is, a vehicle for the publication of avant-garde verse. A prescient Dom Frederic Dunne would soon enough turn the renunciant of Gethsemani to taking up, or retaking up, the pen. Laughlin would eventuate a first (not really *the* first), Cooper would say, critical publisher of Merton. Merton, for his part, would provide spiritual direction for the sometimes uncalvinistic "Calvinist." But then Laughlin would complete the circle by apparently emerging the monk's primary confidant in the eventual case of "S," the object of Merton's infatuation at St. Joseph's Hospital, Louisville. The epilogue in fact is a letter of Laughlin to "S" after the passing of his friend. Laughlin had written: "If I couldn't be a writer, maybe as a publisher I could hang around with writers and have a good time" (xiii). "Writers," yes, and above all monks!

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Incidentally, Merton was among others who appreciated James Laughlin as a poet.

Let us first observe that these are, inevitably, selected letters. The total corpus of extant correspondence consists of 737 pieces, covering the years 1945–68. David Cooper has prudently reduced the letters to a digestible volume. And he has tirelessly provided elucidatory and critical footnotes. The work begins with his introduction and concludes with, in its appendix, a republication of a portrait of Merton by Laughlin.

The letters can be read randomly, thematically—with the aid of the index—or autobiographically, that is, cover to cover, as the stuff of autobiography. They begin "Dear Laughlin" and "Dear Merton" and evolve to "Dear Jay" and "Dear Tom." Struggle is likely to be inherently of more interest than success, and I think I found the letters of the early, struggling monk—and certainly the monk struggling with the *daimon* of writing—more interesting than those of the later, seasoned author. So many of the later letters involve essential particulars of Merton's prodigious publication. This may understandably be why I do not detect herein the same degree of literary quality so perceptible, for example, in Merton's *Letters to Writers.* And Merton apparently had nothing to prove to Laughlin.

Laughlin, for his part, shows the patience of a saint and unfailing tact in dealing with the laborious system of censorship of the pre-Vatican Church. Curiously, the zealous young monk not only accepted the formalities, but even expressed qualms about some of the writers, e.g., D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, New Directions was publishing. Of course Merton went on to become the warm, epistolary friend of Henry Miller. Miller, as unpredictable as ever Merton, wrote of him in 1961: "I feel closer to him, his way of thinking, than any American writer I know of" (189n). I dare say this would be a mixed compliment with a Dom James! Merton's circle could expand indefinitely, I venture, because he had a definitely spiritual center. By 1960, that is, well before Vatican II, he was clearly a one man ecumenical movement. In April of that year he wrote Laughlin: "I have several groups of protestant seminary professors coming, but I don't want to get holed in to that sort of specialty. What would be ideal would be ten or twelve groups a year, small ones: writers, beats, protestants, buddhists, intellectuals, who knows, even politicians.... I think [Robert] Lax would bring [Jack] Kerouac..." (153). Of course, with all this were the collateral complaints. By 1952 he is writing: "Now I have a million Christmas letters to answer." Again, "I have five minutes to write five more letters." As early as 1952 he is talking about "a hut in the woods."

The book is foremost an index to Merton's literary life, about which there are numerous things to be encountered along the way. The *Seven Storey Mountain* was not intended as an autobiography so much as "a cross between Dante's Purgatory and Kafka and a Medieval Miracle play" (10). Merton projected writings on everyone from Duns Scotus to Bob Dylan. Somewhere in between was to be a parallel Anglo-Spanish edition of John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul.* D. T. Suzuki, whom Merton was reading from 1955, was slated to do an introduction to *The Wisdom of the Desert.* The authorities interposed, lest Catholics "dabble in Buddhism." Laughlin, on the other hand, tactfully suggested that Suzuki might induce Buddhists to "a more open mind about Catholicism." And when Robert Giroux of Harcourt, Brace "regretfully" declined the work, Laughlin showed himself enlightened as well as tactful in snapping it up. Earlier, when friction loomed between Merton's two major publishers, the situation was mollified by a "Look, Naomi" letter to his agent, Naomi Burton Stone

(85n). At one point Macmillian apparently tried to move in. "Macmillian offered me," Merton volunteered in 1962, "a ten thousand dollar advance for a book on peace" (196). A battle of books, that is, publishers, may have been averted, ironically, by censorship. Merton's alternative of the time was, of course, the "cold war letters." *Seeds of Contemplation* was originally intended, one might note, as *The Soil and Seeds of Contemplation*, rendering Merton's earthy incarnationality explicit, maybe too explicit. Interestingly, Merton's turn to this genre was consciously in the train of Pascal. Among miscellany one should mention that this volume includes for the first time in its entirety a poem of Merton, "A Letter to Graham Greene" (116–17).

Merton's purview, not to go into his productivity, was indeed extraordinary, sometimes prompting a question heard among Mertonians: "How did a cloistered monk keep up so well with the world?" Laughlin is assuredly a part of the answer. As a publisher in the cultural capital of the country, if not the world, he was ideally placed to send Merton a host of books (deducted from Gethsemani's account, at his request), including the Latin-American poets, of which New Directions was a major publisher. Laughlin was the connection to Ping Ferry, of the Santa Barbara Center, and Ferry emerged as a consultant of Merton on matters of peace and justice. Publisher and friend, Laughlin provided everything from books to a bevy of herbal teas. About "S", the confidant kept a "secret archive" of various pieces "not for publication," as Merton put it, "at least in my lifetime" (289). New Directions would publish a limited and pricey edition of *Eighteen Poems* in 1985, after apparently waiting for the matter of "S" to be broached in the critical study of Michael Mott.

To this reader the Merton-Laughlin relationship was a real and rare partnership. For this reason, with all due appreciation, I suspect it *is* an exaggeration to affirm reductionistically, as does the editor: "It is no exaggeration to say, in fact, that James Laughlin and New Directions *made* Thomas Merton a poet" (xvii). Cooper would appear to say that Laughlin accommodated the early "psalmodist" into his stable of *avant-garde* poets despite, as he puts it, "the conservative and reactionary" social values of the monk. But the less said about the fascist values of an Ezra Pound, as the editor begrudges, the better. And Bertrand Russell himself wrote that D. H. Lawrence invented fascism before the politicians had ever heard of it. After all, the medieval critique of modernity, as evidenced in a neo-medievalist such as William Morris, can be every bit as radical as that of postmodernity. The theorists of postmodernity, one can add, are with few exceptions academicians, that is, arm-chair critics. Whereas the monk of 1947 could write Laughlin: "It is essential to our vocation to be living on the economic fringe, like the untouchables, and we find our peace through poverty and the rest of it" (18). Bravo!

Even a fine work such as is this generally is not without flaw. As suggested by the "psalmodist" above, the editor does seem to have difficulties with the values of the young monk. Not that scholars of Merton need don hairshirts! But the reference to Merton's religious experience in the Rome of 1933 as a "wrenching psychotic break" (xiv) seems to me a regrettable phrase. Again, that Merton "visited a Trappist monastery for the first time" at his entry to Gethsemani (xv) in December, 1941, can be a token of inadequate touch with the whole person. Whatever the source of the problem, of course, *The Seven Storey Mountain* recounts that the aspirant had been on retreat at Gethsemani for Easter week, 1941, and another retreat at Our Lady of the Valley Trappist Monastery in Rhode Island—apart from going into an exploration of the character of the monasteries the young Merton may have haunted in Europe.

There is a significant mechanical lapse, apparently having its origin in the bindery. In any event, there is an elision from page 206 to that of 239, suggesting that a whole signature has been lost in the process, inclusive of the letters from May 1962 to March 1964. Well, this could make the work a collector's item!

Maimed or marked for immortality, the book remains a significant contribution to Merton studies.