

Old Desires and New

Review of

Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Six, 1966–1967

Edited by Christine M. Bochen

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Reviewed by **Timothy Fullerton**

Those who have turned Thomas Merton into an icon or plaster saint in overalls would do well to give this edition of his journals, *Learning to Love*, wide berth. It will make them uncomfortable. The same holds true for those for whom ritual takes precedence over the truth and who place rubric higher than reality, because the wondrous workings of the Holy Spirit are, to quote Dan Berrigan “often subversive.”

This volume of the Journals covers eighteen hectic, chaotic, but ultimately life- and vocation-affirming months in Merton’s life: a time when he went from writing about love to being “swept in love” and to seeing his vocation of twenty-five years threatened by his deep feelings (both physical and emotional) for M., experiencing the thoroughgoing intellectual and theological hostility of his correspondent Rosemary Ruether toward monasticism, and feeling anguish and outright anger toward his Irish Catholic Bostonian, patrician, Harvard MBA abbot with his great unsubtle piety and stubborn conviction in his own rightness that finally rubbed raw the cosmopolitan, bohemian Merton. He wrote of Dom James, “He is a providential affliction, a kind of skin disease that I have to live with in patience. I loathe everything he stands for. And yet I can see that basically he is a man of good desires: but they have been twisted and corroded and he is now, without knowing it, a most inhuman person.”

These months are a time of clear yin and yang for Merton, when a succession of polar opposites challenged everything in him to the core. It is not only the story of his affair with a student nurse, but of a revolution in a human being. It is also, in my estimation, the time Merton progressed from being a good writer to being a great writer.

There is so much to mind in this volume that it is almost mind boggling. Merton’s thoughts on peace and the peace movement, his musings on the church and the direction of post-conciliar Catholicism are rich with the honest questions of a man with deep integrity and intellectual honesty.

I will not pretend to ignore the fact that this volume is the “nurse” volume, where at least half of the whole story has now finally been told. We have here only Merton’s view of the affair. We see his feelings, his thoughts, and his agonies. We hear of M.’s feelings only through Merton’s reference to M.’s emotions, needs, and desires. “I need her love in the deepest possible way, and I know she needs

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mine.” We hear him talking about how he thinks she must be feeling and what he calls their “psychic” connection.

We read his “Midsummer Diary” (an Appendix in this volume), which is extraordinarily intense, full of the agonized self-reflection and projection that love often brings with it. It is a hard read because of the intense emotion Merton displays. “I feel intensely at times that she suffers from our separation, and I can almost register physically the impact of love and longing and suffering that comes to me through the evening and the night from Louisville. She must feel the same coming from me.” This projection on Merton’s part led him to much turmoil and upset, which he tried to still with a few beers. It was this propensity that elicited one of the most human and touching statements in this midsummer *crie de coeur*: “Where will I be when the dark falls and the dragons come and there is no more beer?” He continues, “Here I am crazy mad with love and sitting around the hermitage drinking beer like a dam fool.... This is crazy. It is lamentable. I am flawed. I am nuts. I can’t help it. Here I am now, all sweated up, in a misty foul summer evening, when all is loused up to the neck, happy as a coot.”

His agony is clearly evident, especially if the “Midsummer Diary” is read in the context of the daily journal to fit into the activities of his day-to-day life. Merton is clearly torn. He will talk about how much the hermitage means to him, noticing the birds, the weather, even the breeze. Then M. crosses his mind, or he calls her, and he is again lost in the tangles of emotion and desire. “It seems to me that I have made a mess out of everything. I have not been either a good monk or a good lover. I have been nothing. I have tried to be things that were incompatible and have ended up only hurting her and leaving her sorrowful, confused, pained.”

We are front-row spectators as we watch the struggle between “old desires and new” and listen to Merton wonder at what life outside with M. would be like, knowing however, that the depth and strength of his vows was being hardened in the heat of love.

In the end Merton makes peace with his feelings for M. “Though I know there was much good in our love, I also see clearly how deceptive it was and how it made me continually lie to myself. How we both love each other and lied to each other at the same time.... For me the other truth is better; the truth of simply getting along without eros and resting in the silence with ‘what is.’” Merton reaffirms his desire to live as a hermit by formally signing his intent to do so before the abbot on September 8, 1966. In spite of this M. remains a constant in his life, at least Merton’s memory of her does, as is borne out by the references and passing feelings of love and honest affection he mentions in the later journals.

The fact that he learns, at the heart level, that he is capable of being both lover and beloved, is crucial to the understanding of Merton.

While M. was challenging Merton at the heart/emotions level, Rosemary Ruether was hard at work throwing concerted correspondence, which challenge on an intellectual and theological basis the key institutions of monasticism and especially the hermit life. For anyone interested in their lively and provocative correspondence, I would recommend reading *At Home in the World: Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (edited by Sr. Mary Tardiff, OP; Orbis Books, 1995).

One follows Merton’s train of thoughts as he struggles to integrate his love and feelings for M. into his life, while responding to Ruether’s well-reasoned challenges. It always comes back to the preciousness of solitude and the importance of it to his own spiritual path. The long walks go from

descriptive to experiential as the post-M. Merton treasures his life and the gift of his hermitage.

The depth of the antipathy Merton felt for Dom James comes through more here than in any other volume. They are two wholly different people, who, were it not for the connection of religious life, would probably have had little to do with each other. The patrician, business-minded abbot and the bohemian writer simply did not see things the same way.

The fact of Merton's coming to terms with the truth of his vocation, and his acceptance of the rightness of the hermit life for him is the linchpin of the book. "I had supper of chop suey and rice, and walked in the clear cool evening utterly at peace and happy with the cottage. In fact I stayed up late, not for any special reason, but just walking around smelling the good smell of the cedarwood." Merton now knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, "that I was all wrong, that I was going against everything that made sense in my life, going against all that was true and authentic in my vocation, going against the grace and love of God." He was home, truly home in the "hatch," and he let it sink into his bones, not at all unmindful of how close he had come to losing it all.

Merton no longer has the unspoken "what if..." He confronts the reality of human life in all its aspects, confronts the possibilities with brutal honesty, fights the longings, the periods of self-deception, and the gnawing confrontation in his heart and soul of "old desires and new." The internal dissonance caused by the sneaking around, the phone calls, and the visits brought him to the point that he was actually relieved when Dom James found out about M.

From that point Merton pulls back into his vowed life, albeit with bouts of desire and longing. The days seem sweeter to him, the silence more life-affirming, and his thoughts run deeper. His thoughts on the church are less polemical and very rich. Thomas Merton was a man transformed. His humanity literally cries out, and Christine Bochen's sensitive editing clarifies and accents his deep struggles.

As a final thought, I wish to share a powerful impression I had after finishing this volume. My own small efforts in helping with the editing of the technical glossary of volume seven had brought me deeply in touch with the *Asian Journal* again. In that light I would venture to say that the moment of awe, and what James Joyce called "aesthetic arrest," that Merton experienced before the reclining Buddha at Polonnaruwa was not the key experience of his later life that many have made it out to be, even to the point where some believe Merton was about to become a Buddhist.

I believe that the experience of love that Merton had with M., and the depths into which it calls, was the true initiatory experience of his life, where he was lifted out of himself and taken to the transcendent apophatic depth of his being. It was this transformation that opened Merton to the point where he could experience the depth of awe he felt at Polonnaruwa, which became the highlight of his Asian trip. However, the events of March-August 1966 were the crucible that brought him forth as a whole being—one truly learning to love.

He was stretched so far
 he seemed to span the
 horizons....
 Her love had lifted him from
 the chaos of the Burnt Men
 into the
 Abyss of the Lovers...

that place where
the dance and the dancer
become
the danced...
and Oh, how the dervishes whirled
as Louie sang "Silver Dagger"
for the thousandth
time alone...
the hermit/lover in
his darkest night...
slowly dancing in his hatch.
God had made him mad...
She had made him madder...
and
his joy was so deep
and
his pain so great
that he could only dance
and sing "Silver Dagger"
to God...
Who softly
sang
back through
hermit tears.