

A Happy Anniversary

Review of
Merton's Palace of Nowhere
 25th Anniversary Edition
 By James Finley
 Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978, 2003
 157 pages / \$10.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

This 25th Anniversary edition of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* reads as well today as it did when the book was first published in 1978, ten years after Thomas Merton's death, and for the very same reasons. Finley combines an insightful reading of Merton's thought with what might be characterized as an insider's appreciation of Thomas Merton and his legacy. Author James Finley, who entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1961 and lived there until he left the monastic life in 1967, was deeply influenced by his novice master, Father Louis (a.k.a. Thomas Merton). In June 2003, James Finley, now a clinical psychologist in private practice and well-known retreat leader, delivered a plenary address at the Eighth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in Vancouver, British Columbia. His message and his witness moved those who heard him, myself included. Sharing reminiscences of Merton and most importantly sharing what he himself had learned from Merton, Finley presented a talk that was at once a blend of the wisdom of Merton *and* of Finley. Hearing that talk made me realize that this is what sets *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* apart from the many books that have been written about Merton in the last thirty-five years. The book, like the address Finley delivered in Vancouver, shows that Finley not only knows Merton's thought but that he has allowed Merton's vision to shape his own spirituality. While the book reflects Finley's thorough familiarity with Merton's writings on prayer and contemplation, it also reveals knowledge honed by experience. As a result, this is a book that is at once intellectually challenging and spiritually engaging.

Before moving on, a note on the 25th Anniversary Edition is in order. This handsome reprint of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* features new forewords by James Finley and Brother Patrick Hart, OCSO in addition to the forewords by Finley and Henri Nouwen included in the original edition. Omitted from the Silver Anniversary Edition is the sub-title, *A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self*, which appeared in the 1978 edition.

In the Introduction, entitled "Learning to See," James Finley tells his reader what the book is

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about and offers some advice on how it ought to be read. Put simply, it is a book about prayer – which is at the heart of Merton’s spirituality – and it is to be read prayerfully. In fact, Finley characterizes the book as “a series of prayerful explorations” into Merton’s spirituality and invites the reader “to savor” Merton’s words. In other words, Finley asks his readers to engage in “spiritual reading” – to listen and absorb the meaning of Merton’s words. Then reading this book can, I think, become a retreat, guided by two skilled and wise masters.

This book *about* prayer is above all an invitation to enter *into* prayer and so enter into “the palace of nowhere” in which each of us may realize his or her deepest self and know it to be in God. Merton’s spirituality, Finley explains, “pivots on the question of ultimate human identity” which finds “fulfillment in bringing our entire life into a transforming, loving communion with the ineffable God” (21, 23). In five chapters, James Finley elaborates on this call to communion with God within the framework of Thomas Merton’s distinction between the “true self” and the “false self.” In Chapter One, “The Foundation of The False Self,” Finley discusses Merton’s understanding of the illusory self in the context of Adam’s fall, noting that “Merton sometimes speaks of Adam’s fall in terms of Adam falling through the center of himself, thus placing himself between himself and God.” Reflecting on this image, Finley notes that “we can say that not only does the false self stand between the true self and God but that the false self quickly begins to construct its own dark universe of disorientated nothingness which it claims as its prized creation and crowning glory” (37).

In the four chapters that follow – “The True Self in The World,” “The True Self in Religious Searching,” “The Realization of The True Self,” and “The Insight,” Finley develops key Merton themes relevant to Merton’s spirituality, some of which, like his ideas of the “false” and “true self,” are paradoxical in nature: e.g., the world is both a place of encounter with God *and* a place of evil; we are called to solitude *and* communion. Finley explores a host of topics intertwined with Merton’s spirituality such as images of God, faith, conversion, purity of heart, death, communication and communion, and finally contemplation. “Contemplation,” Finley writes, “is the true self emerging in awareness” in God (127). “The insight arises as an obscure yet deep realization in faith that our ultimate identity is hidden in the secret of God’s identity” (129). “The insight,” he continues, “is that we are the insight” and “that we had it all along” (130). Finley elaborates on “the insight” with striking simplicity and clarity: “We suddenly see the true self in an old woman pulling weeds, in a rose bush heavy with blossoms sagging in a summer storm. We hear the true self in a squeaky gate swinging in the wind. We hear it in our next breath. We touch it in our reaching out to our brother and sister. And we see, hear and touch the true self not by mystifying everything but by simply letting each thing be. Each thing is only what it is, and in that alone each thing is a manifestation of the ALL from whom all came, in whom all is sustained, and to whom all returns” (130-31). God is no thing. “In God’s no-thing-ness is his perfect freedom.” God is “ALL in all” (142).

Finley concludes with Merton’s reflection, penned in the journal he kept during the final weeks of his life while he was traveling in Asia, on three doors – all of which are one. “This one door,” Finley writes, “is the door of the Palace of Nowhere. It is the door of God. It is our very self, our true self called by God to perfect union with himself. And it is through this door we secretly enter in responding to the saving call to: ‘Come with me to the Palace of Nowhere where all the many things are one’” (146-47). In Merton’s palace of nowhere, all paradox is transcended.

Finley’s sources are varied: he draws on an assortment of widely-read Merton books, including *The New Man*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* as well as the then

unpublished *The Inner Experience* (now edited and published by William H. Shannon [HarperSanFrancisco, 2003]), a few writings about Merton (recall that Finley was writing in the late seventies), a selection of Merton tapes and his own memories of exchanges with Merton. These remembered lines are treasures especially worth pondering, as are Finley's reflections on them. For example, he recalls Merton telling him "to quit trying so hard in prayer." As Finley remembers it,

He said: "How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun." A small green apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large, red, ripe and juicy beside its small green counterparts. Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in his hidden action within us (114).

If you read James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* years ago, I recommend that you consider reading it again. If you have not yet read the book, I suggest you simply must. Either way – plan to read this book as Finley suggests you should – slowly and prayerfully.