

Thomas Merton: Spiritual Fake?

Review of

The Death of Thomas Merton: A Novel

By Paul Hourihan

Redding, CA: Vedantic Shores Press, 2003

144 pages / \$13.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Donald Grayston**

I experienced more resistance reading this book than any other book I have ever reviewed. I started to read it a dozen times, and only forced myself to finish it when I could no longer bear the thought of how late the review was going to be. On the cover it is called a novel, but it isn't one. Novels have plot, setting, nuance, texture and character development – indeed, usually more than one character! This is a diatribe, a character assassination, a polemic, an angry screed, a pathetic exercise in projection, and an assault on the general consensus in the community of Merton scholars and readers about who Merton was and what he was about.

Hourihan believes, in sum, that Merton was a spiritual fake, and that his death in Thailand in 1968 was his only way out of an unbearable dilemma. The dilemma was this: Merton, having for the first time in his life (except for his brief knowledge of Bramachari in New York) encountered genuine spirituality in India – “India’s soul, her secret face” (59) – had come to a place of utter self-loathing, as well as alienation from the Catholic Church. He therefore faced two equally wretched possibilities: to return to the United States to live out the rest of his life as a monk of Gethsemani, maintaining the façade of “great Christian writer” and continuing to live in self-hatred; or, having faced the reality, to leave the Cistercian order and the Catholic Church and seek in Vedanta what minimal measure of spiritual growth might be possible for him in the few remaining years of this lifetime. If he chose the first, he would devastate himself; if he chose the second, he would devastate the thousands of souls who looked to him for spiritual leadership. Thus, the only solution: death, semi-self-willed, a kind of subintentioned suicide, engineered for the sake of respectability to take the form of an accident.

So where is Hourihan coming from in writing this book? Now departed (no date of death is given), Hourihan is described in the biographical note at the end of the book as a “mystic and teacher.” Born and educated in Boston, he earned a doctorate in English, studied Vedanta for 45 years, and for the last fifteen of these, taught in the area of mysticism in Ontario. The book, I suspect, is self-published, with Vedantic Shores Press, otherwise unknown to me, being his posthumous personal vehicle. More hunches: Irish surname, born in Boston, a doctorate but no connection with an academic institution, the book revealing intimate acquaintance with Catholic liturgy and doctrine. Hmmm.

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It doesn't take a Freud to picture the author as himself an alienated Catholic as well as an academically estranged scholar, at the end of his life and after 45 years of the study of Vedanta, still angry as spit at what he sees as the way he was himself spiritually betrayed by a religious institution which could only teach him the externals of spirituality, but could not bring his *atman* into transcendent and experiential knowledge of its oneness with *Brahman*. In this connection, a notable irony. He criticizes Merton for his "careless speech . . . loose, sometimes profane, vulgar – something one never encounters in an illumined person," whose language will always be "thoughtful, controlled, free from the impurities common to worldly speech" (123). He skewers himself here, however, because the entire book seethes with barely-repressed anger against the Catholic Church, expressed in anything but thoughtful or controlled ways.

He slams Merton for his exuberance, his extraversion (but was he an extravert? My sense is that he was an introvert with highly-developed social skills), his superficial acquaintance with Asian traditions, his affair with the nurse (whom he calls "Sheila"), even his friendship with other women, his egotism, and his willingness to receive the adulation of the masses. He uses the device of an inner voice, variously identified as the voice of God or the voice of Merton's own soul (one thing in the Vedantic view, in any case), to convey this critique. It's as if Merton, for the last 24 hours of his life, heard in his soul a non-stop recording of the voice of Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, the psychiatrist who in one devastating moment in 1956, told Merton that he saw him as the kind of wannabe hermit who would like to have his hermitage on Times Square with a sign pointing to it.

On that note, I will pass on the only paragraph of the book I enjoyed, a description of Merton's entry into the hermitage in 1965:

the man who had been telling them [his readers] for years about contemplation inched his way with fear and trembling toward the little forest house where, except for his hundreds of paperbacks, his jazz albums, his bongo drums, and the stream of male and female visitors making their way armed with canned beer to his door, he would be All Alone . . . (114-15).

For those of us who respect and enjoy Merton, and who honor him in his imperfection, this could be an affectionate piece of teasing. (I recall a similar comment in Troyat's life of Tolstoy, which ended with a statement something like: "And so, surrounded by 47 servants carrying 85 trunks of necessities to the summer palace, the apostle of poverty took his way.") To Hourihan, it is a way of demonstrating, not Merton's paradoxical character or flawed humanity, but his utter vacuity and unworthiness to be in any sense a spiritual teacher to anyone.

What a sad, sad book! Recommended only to those with an obsessional desire to own every book containing the name of Thomas Merton.