

## Group Portrait of Four Unique Pilgrims

Review of

*The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*

By Paul Elie

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003

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Reviewed by **Bradford T. Stull**

How does one review a book that already has been reviewed copiously from coast to coast? Consider the following luminous list of periodicals in which reviews of Paul Elie's book have appeared. *The Wall Street Journal* (March 26, 2003), *Publishers Weekly* (April 7, 2003), *Time* (April 14, 2003), *The San Francisco Chronicle* (April 20, 2003), *Books and Culture* (May/June 2003), *The New Yorker* (May 12, 2003) have each devoted time, space, and energy to discussions of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. Its sub-subtitle is not unimportant: "Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Walker Percy."

It is tempting to review exhaustively the reviews themselves. Such a "meta-review" might help to avoid "review redundancy" and also help us to understand why this book sparked the interest and the imagination of reviewers, editors, and periodicals not explicitly or evidently religious. One hardly thinks of *The Wall Street Journal*, for instance, as a place where a positive review of a book about four Catholic writers – one of whom is Dorothy Day – might appear. Day offered a criticism of America that one might reasonably assume to counter the prevailing winds at a newspaper named after the center of American capitalism and commerce.

That said, these reviews share two characteristics. First, they are uniformly positive. Each appreciates Elie's personal engagement with these four figures, his attempt to read them and himself through them. They take seriously Elie's commitment to read religiously and thus to read himself as a religious human being. Second, and this is most pertinent to readers of Merton, each review focuses on a particular Merton: the "wild" Merton of England, of Columbia, the devout Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and even, in the case of the *Time* review, the Merton "with a taste for bourbon" who "had a brief affair with a nurse." What doesn't explicitly emerge however, and this is an injustice both to Merton and Elie, is the Merton of the late 1950s and 1960s: the Merton of inter-religious dialogue, the Merton of engagement with racism, with the threat of nuclear war, with existential meaning in an age of terror, suffering, and angst.

This is not to say that Elie doesn't discuss the "wild Merton" or the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He does. His index, for instance, includes references to Merton's "youthful sexual indiscretions" and to Merton's "love affair." The former includes a discussion of Merton fathering a child; the latter is a discussion of Merton's involvement with the nurse. So too *The Seven Storey Mountain* figures in Elie's work.

However, Elie's Merton is more sophisticated than these reviews tend to reveal. His Merton is

a Catholic and a writer, who was, at his best, a Catholic writer more than a wild man with a penchant for women, more than a monk who had an affair, more than a pious, devout convert who rejected the chaos of secular humankind on the verge of World War II. Elie's Merton is a sophisticated thinker and writer fully involved with, and at home in, the challenging complexities of a world that is not entirely Catholic, not entirely Christian. It is a world that holds within itself Albert Camus and D. T. Suzuki, St. Augustine and the brothers Berrigan, Aldous Huxley and Pope John XXIII. All these figures, and others, played a role in Merton's own pilgrimage.

Revealing, for instance, is Elie's discussion of the reasons Merton decided to end his relationship with the nurse. One is tempted to discover Merton's intellectual and spiritual sophistication in more obvious places (e.g. a book like *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*). Elie, however, discovers Merton's extraordinary range in a moment that is problematic, at best. However one might feel about the affair and Merton's conduct, whatever one might think about the affair and Merton's conduct, Elie helps one realize that Merton's decision to end the affair and recommit himself to his monastic vocation was a decision formed in conversation not simply with God, or Jesus, or even his abbot. Merton ended the affair as he came to craft "his monastic calling in Camus's terms" (391). He decided, like Camus, to commit himself to challenging "the absurdity of modern life and the coercive force of modern mass society" (390). Merton decided, in response to his engagement with Camus, to see himself as a monk who is "the rebel par excellence, embracing limitation, living one day to the next, declining to go the way of society" (391).

Is this picture of the monk as rebel par excellence one reason why luminaries like Harold Bloom, Richard Rodriguez, and Robert Giroux endorse Elie's book? Bloom is a major literary critic, perhaps one of the most important and dominant voices at work in literary studies. Rodriguez is author of *The Hunger for Memory* among other germinal works detailing the nature of "multiculturalism," family, and education. Robert Giroux is an editor not exactly unknown to readers of Thomas Merton. These three voices are not to be taken lightly or to be ignored.

Bloom, the back cover of Elie's book tells us, claims that *The Life You Save* "is lucid, humane, poignant, and wise. As a work of the spirit, it is universal and in no way sectarian." Likewise, the back cover shares Rodriguez's view: "Paul Elie's book reads like a magnificent novel, with four deeply distinct characters who just happen to have been the best Catholic writers of the twentieth century." Other promotional material shares Giroux's opinion: *The Life You Save* is a "brilliant new study." Elie's insights into Merton, Day, O'Connor, and Percy are "fresh and original." In short, Giroux claims that Elie's efforts make "a remarkable book."

If *The Life You Save* is humane, poignant, wise, if it reads like a "magnificent novel," if it is a "brilliant new study," it is so for at least two reasons. First, as all the reviews note, it places Elie into deep conversation, even pilgrimage, with four extraordinary Catholic writers and thus places these writers into deep conversation, even pilgrimage, with each other. As a result, it also invites its readers into these conversations, these pilgrimages. Second, to those who are in deep conversation, even pilgrimage, with Merton, it offers a vision of a monk who himself is in deep conversation, even pilgrimage, with writers like Camus.

Elie places Merton where he belongs, sees Merton as he was. He was not simply a wild man gone monk who had an affair. He was also wild man gone monk who had an affair who was, finally, informed by a wide range of thinkers and writers, Catholic and not Catholic, Christian and not Christian. To what end? To this end: to be "the authentic Christian Camus has longed to meet" (391). This is a pilgrimage that challenges all who seek to make their ways in the dawn of the twenty-first century.