

Personal, Prolific, Provocative

Review of

Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters – The Essential Collection

Edited by William H. Shannon & Christine M. Bochen

San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008

402 pages / \$29.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Rose Marie Berger**

Esteemed Merton scholars Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon have again brought to bear their years of wisdom and insight into Thomas Merton – the man, monk, merry prankster, mystic, master poet, and writer – in crafting the essential epistolary collection *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*. Carefully culling from the more than ten thousand letters archived at the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, Bochen and Shannon – who edited individually or together three of the five previous volumes of Merton letters, as well as Merton’s own *Cold War Letters* collection – have selected what they consider Merton’s “best letters” from the previous volumes, from January 2, 1942, when he was a novice at Gethsemani, to November 1968, when he wrote his final letter from New Delhi, India.

The breadth and variety of Merton’s correspondents is staggering. Quite simply: he wrote to those whom he was interested in learning from and he responded to many who were interested in him and his ideas. The constraints of monastic life and the sometimes ill-fitting gift of stability lent themselves to making out of Merton the prolific letter-writer he became. In this collection, one finds letters to American writer Henry Miller, Pope John XXIII, Nicaraguan journalist Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Nicaraguan president Somoza, American sixth-grader Susan Chapulis, Pakistani Sufi Abdul Aziz, *Saturday Evening Post* editor John Hunt, Ethel Kennedy, mayor of Hiroshima Shinzo Hamai, ecologist Rachel Carson, novelist James Baldwin, religious scholar Martin E. Marty, Coretta Scott King, beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, Zen scholar D. T. Suzuki, Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and many more, both famous and obscure. The art of letter writing was for Merton an expression of intimacy. His letters reveal his affection for individuals and for ideas, and express theological and political affection for humanity to be its best self. “I do not hesitate to confess,” wrote Merton to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr in 1956, “that letters from my friends have always and will always mean a great deal to me” (vii).

Rose Marie Berger, a Catholic poet and peace activist, is an associate editor at *Sojourners* magazine [www.sojo.net] in Washington, DC. Her forthcoming book is *Who Killed Donte Manning? The Myth and Story of an American Neighborhood* (Apprentice House Press, 2009). She can be contacted at www.rosemarieberger.com.

Merton aficionados will be familiar with the organization of the previous collections of letters: *The Hidden Ground of Love* (1985), his reflections on religious experience and the social concerns of the day; *The Road to Joy* (1989), more intimate correspondence with friends and family; *The School of Charity* (1990), responses to religious renewal, Vatican II, and spiritual direction; *The Courage for Truth* (1993), ideas shared with writers from around the world; and *Witness to Freedom* (1994), Merton's stand against the fettered life, wherever found. These five make up the bulk of Merton's published correspondence. In *A Life in Letters*, however, Bochen and Shannon have expanded the five themes into nine. The shift is more than just adding on new themes. The editors reflect a new way of organizing Merton's letter-writing interests based on having now read nearly all of Merton's correspondence. William Shannon only had partial knowledge of the vast reservoir when he started organizing the correspondence for publication in the early 1980s. "An explanation of the difference between the titles of the published five volumes and the nine themes of the just published one volume, the 'best' of the letters, has to do with the contrast between where I was in 1982 (in terms of my knowledge of the Merton letters) when I was appointed by the Merton Trust with the editorship of the Merton letters, and where Christine Bochen and I were in 2006 when we accepted the editorship of *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*," he explained by e-mail. "In 1982," Shannon continued, "in choosing the material that would go into the five volumes, it was, I believe, my knowledge of Merton's life and published works that guided me rather than any thorough understanding of the Merton letters (which at that time I did not have). By contrast when Dr. Bochen and I began working on *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*, we had a much more comprehensive knowledge of the letters. We were, therefore, in a much better position to choose the nine topics that guided our selection of letters."

For the seasoned reader then, the Table of Contents itself in *A Life in Letters* (v) offers new insight into Merton's life and thought. The nine topics are: "A Life in Letters," examples of Merton's overtly autobiographical letters; "Becoming and Being a Monk," his reflections on and wrestling with the Christian monastic tradition; "Living the Writer's Life," exchanges with literary agent and friend Naomi Burton Stone and early Merton archivist Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr; "Speaking the Truth," letters to writers around the world; "Seeking God in the Ordinarity of Life," explorations in Christian mysticism and contemplation; "Reading the Signs of the Times," Merton's unmasking of the moral crisis beneath social and political issues; "Networking for Peace," correspondence on war and violence, peace and nonviolence; "Keeping Faith in Times of Change," letters on Roman Catholicism, Vatican II, and honoring tradition while demanding that it respond to the present; "Seeking Unity Beyond Difference," discussions with Jews, Muslims, Taoists, Buddhists, and Hindus.

For the new reader, this collection gives the freshest thinking on the "essential letters," and comes with helpful section introductions by the editors to situate the reader in Merton's life and the political or social context of the time, as well as introducing readers to the correspondents themselves. Occasionally, the sheer volume of selected entries appears to have gotten away from the careful editors' hands – at least one excerpt from a 1949 letter to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, a teacher who corresponded with Merton for more than twenty years, was repeated (83, 182-83). Undoubtedly, this will be corrected in subsequent editions.

While it is necessary to place the letters in this collection in the context of Merton's own life and in the context of Merton's overall legacy, it is also important to examine Merton's letter-writing

art in the context of twentieth-century American literature. Literary sociologists David Barton and Nigel Hall argue in *Letter Writing as a Social Practice* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2000) that letter writing is a genre unto itself and deserves to be studied as enthusiastically as poetry or the novel. Additionally, they posit that “many contemporary genres have their origins in letters” (Barton & Hall 4). The new research into letter writing raises several questions regarding Thomas Merton, who was, as Shannon and Bochen put it, “one of the most prolific and provocative letter writers of the twentieth century” (vii). How will Merton be critiqued as a letter-writer *per se*? William Shannon said in the same personal e-mail that “Merton was an amazingly good letter-writer.” How will critics analyze Merton’s letter-writing genius as compared to his innovation and skill as a poet or his daring analysis as an essayist? British novelist, satirist, and literary critic Evelyn Waugh, who prepared the manuscript of Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* for a British audience, so much admired Merton’s skill that he advised Merton to “put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it” (ix). Of course, Merton didn’t set book-writing aside, but he did continue over his life to perfect his letter-writing craft. More importantly, are Merton’s letters derivative of his political essays, theological and monastic treatises, autobiographical writings, poetry, and intellectual critiques or, as Barton and Hall prompt, do all these genres have their genesis in Merton’s letters instead? Often the personal correspondence of a well-known personality is collected and published in order to provide enthusiasts with an “inside look” at the “personal” life that would otherwise be hidden. The publication of personal letters can have a tinge of voyeurism. I would suggest that it is in Merton’s letters that we find the foundations of his published works. The letters show him testing ideas, crafting opinions, grounding his analysis, playing with images and phrasing, sorting and sifting the essential components of his life story. From this perspective, Merton’s letters (and journals) are the seedbed for his completed works in other genres, rather than the frosting on his “real” work.

Equally important in recognizing Merton’s brilliance in the genre of letter-writing is understanding the “American-ness” of Merton’s correspondence project. Elizabeth Hewitt, author of *Correspondence and American Literature, 1770-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), points out that in 1831 Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that the marvel of American political ideology was the seeming ability to strike a balance between individual liberty and a celebration of democratic principles (4). “Letters emphasize the singularity of a particular letter-writer,” writes Hewitt, “even as they strive to position the recipient in an idealized relationship with the writer. They emphasize solidarity and individualism at once,” and thus reconcile a balance of power that is fundamentally American (4). Merton’s liberality in correspondence provides an exemplar in emphasizing “solidarity and individualism at once.” As Merton explored in letters his own individuality as a means of revealing the True Self or becoming a spiritually authentic human being, he fostered solidarity with and among correspondents in broad array of stations and stages of life, and social, political, religious, and geographical locations. One could argue, applying Hewitt’s analysis, that Merton established a quintessentially American balance in his letters. *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters* is a critical component to exploring the place of Merton’s letters in American literary history. Shannon and Bochen are unarguably the best-situated Merton scholars for selecting correspondence that is both comprehensive and truly representative.

Amid all the amazing letters in this collection, one letter stood out for its uniqueness. On January 12, 1963, Merton wrote to ecologist and biologist Rachel Carson – one of his relatively few letters

to a scientist. He was making his way through Carson's *Silent Spring* – the book that launched the modern environmental movement. Merton writes:

We don't like the looks of a Japanese beetle. We let ourselves be convinced by a salesman that the beetle is a dire threat. It then becomes obvious that the thing to do is exterminate the beetle by any means whatever even if it means the extermination of many other beings which have not harmed us and which even bring joy into our lives: worse still, we will exterminate the beetle even if it means danger to our children and to our very selves. To make this seem "reasonable" we go to some lengths to produce arguments that our steps are really "harmless." I am afraid I do not relish the safety of the atomic age. (209)

In this simple analysis, Merton crystallizes the crisis in modern thinking and the spiritual blindness that is the wound of the modern age. Yet Merton, with wry humor, ends his letter to Carson by confessing that he has not "totally renounced" his use of the pesticide DDT, and Merton – caretaker for the monastery forest – asks if Carson can help him address a plague of bagworms that are killing his cedar trees (210).