The Times They Are A'Makin'

Review of
The Monk's Record Player:
Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966
By Robert Hudson
Foreword by David Dalton
Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018
xiv + 249 pp. / $23.00 cloth

Reviewed by **Aaron K. Kerr**

In this creative and provocative book, Robert Hudson considers the personal lives of Thomas Merton and, to a lesser extent, Bob Dylan, attempting to connect their poetic sensibilities, primarily Dylan's influence on Merton's *Cables to the Ace*. The author suggests also that Bob Dylan provided "the soundtrack" to Merton's "crisis" romance with the nurse who cared for him during his convalescence after back surgery in the spring of 1966 (100-10). According to Hudson, the romantic crisis, infused with the sonic newness of Dylan, led to a renewal of Merton's mind. The book's themes are accompanied by extensive footnotes and research in Merton's journals. There is a Dylan discography provided, as well as parallel timelines connecting the events of monk's and musician's lives and livelihood.

Hudson's interpretation develops in three parts. The first (13-61) is a cursory overview of Merton's life as a monk up to 1966. He focuses on Merton's longing for more solitude, his desire to join the Carthusians or the Camaldolese, in short his struggle with remaining at Gethsemani. Hudson does not mention his "volunteering" to be Master of Novices in 1955, a sort of unequivocal resolve of commitment to the Trappists. He does amplify Merton's negotiations with the abbot in order to become a hermit, making much of the apparent conflict between Merton's wishes and the abbot's resistance. By focusing narrowly on these few dimensions during this multivalent, 25-year period, Merton is painted as dissatisfied: resisting authority and harboring a desire to break free from some oppressive institutional fetter. This narrow lens does give the author a scaffolding upon which to climb onto a particular interpretation of the relationship with Margie Smith, and from there, to connect to the author's enigmatic cultural icon, Bob Dylan, since he argues that Dylan and Merton are uniquely American, sharing iconic status, celebrity, tremendous literary output, painting/drawing and a general enigmatic flavor. For all that, what the book presents is a psychologized, individualist, Protestant, polite, baby-boomer version of Merton and Dylan. The author's hermeneutic is basically therapeutic,

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Aaron K. Kerr is associate professor and chair of the Philosophy Department at Gannon University, Erie, PA. In writing on the philosophy of technology and aesthetics, he has found the insights of Thomas Merton to be especially informative. He has published articles in *Logos* and *Humanities and Technology Review*, and his forthcoming book, *Encounters in Thought* (Cascade, 2019) includes an exploration of Merton's contemplative life as an exemplification of intellectual openness.

and all events are measured by a certain reductive psychologism. That narrative sounds like this: person oppressed by authorities and repressed by unacknowledged feelings; person persecuted by forces and factors beyond his control; person expresses latent feelings and embroilments through art/self-expression. This is the structure I sense the author brings to his research and writing. And though the book is elegantly written, and the author is adroit in piecing together details and events, the claims the book makes seem a stretch to me, largely because of this therapeutic lens.

The second part (63-117) is a course on how, why, and to what extent Margie Smith and Thomas Merton were romantically involved. Dylan and Joan Baez are introduced as foils to Merton and Margie. And though Hudson suggests that Merton interpreted his relationship by way of such Dylan songs as "From a Buick 6," among others, he does not explore the possibility that Dylan, on the same album, wrote "Queen Jane Approximately" as a scathing message to Joan Baez after their falling out. Especially intriguing in this section is the author's ability to bring us into Merton's listening room – how he got the record player, his initial journalistic responses to Dylan. The author suggests that in addition to sharing an appreciation for Joan Baez, Merton and Margie talked about Bob Dylan, about whom they seemed to disagree. Here is where the book gets interesting since we can appreciate the way music and the erotic conspire in many ways to enliven the imagination, sorrow, nostalgia, lament and truth-telling. Hudson does discuss Merton's reading of Camus during this brief romantic experience – chapter seven (88-99) is titled "The Absurd Man." But he only scratches the surface and places Camus' thought as affirming the absurd fact that a monk had fallen in love. A more realistic interpretation is that of Ramón Cao Martínez, who suggests that Merton's thinking and writing at the same time the romance was building led to the *rejection* of Camus' absurdist ethics of quantity, "the will to multiply the number and the variety of life experiences." It was in *disagreeing* with Camus' ethic, Martinez suggests, that Merton decided to cut off this romance, bound as he was to the singular experience of a monk's life. This suggests that a more complex dynamic of reason and affection's inter-workings were going on with Merton, not to mention Margie (see "The Readings of a Diarist," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50.2 [2015] 347-51).

The third part (119-91) is a venturesome effort to establish Bob Dylan's influence on Merton's life and writing, particularly his book-length antipoem *Cables to the Ace* which, according to Hudson, is a clear demarcation of Merton's new vision, brought about by listening to and reading the poetry of Bob Dylan. The narrow scope of the book is acknowledged in the author's introduction in which he calls the book "an intentionally selective biography" and notes that "important details have been left out simply because they were irrelevant to the themes discussed" (7). If, as a reader, that acknowledgement will free you up to enter into the imaginative fray of Merton's motivations and appreciations, you will enjoy the book for its speculations and conjectures, especially those which compare the modes and machinations of Merton and Dylan as poets. But that acknowledgement did the opposite for me. I read it as one more reductive rendering in order to be able to hone in and construct a significant aspect of one biography in the light of the author's own loves: his love of Dylan and his love for Merton. Merton's and Margie's eroticism is placed in a well-worn American context. But a careful reading of Merton's journals reveals a pastoral/fatherly concern which accompanies his attraction, raising pertinent questions about a previous relationship, a sign of Merton's deep awareness and authenticity. A celibate is not healthy unless they face, as Merton did (perhaps over-did), and see the good of their own sexual impulses, for the erotic is implicit in the devotion to God,

the very call to celibacy. Merton, according to his journals, patiently urged Margie to sacrifice. Hudson claims that Margie sacrificed more. Hudson therefore strongly implies that Merton *should have* interrupted and relinquished his monastic commitments. And in the therapeutic mind-set, this seems the logical choice. The first section in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is called "Barth's Dream." Here, like Hudson, Merton connects music, theology and the erotic. In Merton's conjecture he suggests that Barth's spiritual anxiety is due in part to the intellect's *idea* of love as agape. Merton sees in Barth's love of Mozart's music, a longing for an experience of love as erotic, a sacramental, sensual love. (Ironically, as history shows, the Catholic Merton, sensual and erotic, experiences but does not simply act on his erotic impulse. The towering intellect of Protestantism, Barth, longs to actualize the erotic in his devotion to God, but commits adultery with his secretary/lover as he writes the *Church Dogmatics*.) Unwittingly, Merton gives us a key to the mystery of erotic love, and the Catholic sacramental tradition which preserves it in celibacy. I trust Merton's conjectures more than Hudson's.

In reading the book I began to see it as the rough start of a movie script, a film in historical fiction about a monk, his indiscretions and a lonely rock star in a volatile time in American history. I might go to see that movie, especially if the monk and the young student consummate their love. The problem is, they never did, so far as textual evidence is concerned, and Merton never wrote anything formal on Bob Dylan, and Dylan never acknowledged that he had ever heard of Thomas Merton. These gaps leave room for the author to draw scenes for us, asking the reader to join him there, interpreting for us the many moods of Merton. For example, in describing Merton's desire to become a solitary, Hudson concludes that Merton's unrelenting requests were evidence of his superior knowledge of the call of God, "that he knew God's intentions for his own life better than the church did" (41). First, I don't know that Merton would ever construe his life as being "his own." And second, the monastic process of discernment takes time to "test the spirits" as scripture says. Hudson consistently construes the narrative this way, as though Merton embodies the gradual victories of modernity's idolatry of individual choice-making. Another example: Hudson connects Merton's journal-writing explicitly to the events that transpired. Reflections on a deer in his journal are somehow a premonition of Margie. Perhaps they are, but I sensed the movie director setting up the scene for us: "He will write about the deer. The incident seems significant somehow, not just because they seldom linger so long in the clearing, but because some kind of connection was made. . . . Inside, he tosses a log on the fire, stokes it, and there it is – the pain" (65). Very creative way to connect deer encounter, fire, his impending back surgery, and the next paragraph. Is not nature always significant for most contemplatives? And then, in order to set up his encounter with Margie we read this: "All this – the deer, the pain . . . has roused in him something that he finds hard to admit . . . . The other side of solitude is loneliness" (67). Merton was teaching lay people about solitude and emptiness long before he saw that deer and long before he had other pains, both physical and spiritual (see for example *Thoughts in Solitude* [1958]). A monk has a confessor and his prayer admits God into the truth of his loneliness. I don't see how the author can know what Merton found hard to admit. The author psychologizes an inevitable monastic/human experience, as if Merton's loneliness was something new to him, and foreboding. I suppose if you need to justify your claim that Bob Dylan and Merton are American archetypes of enigmatic loneliness, these scenes and descriptions become necessary. Throughout the book there are expectations on the

reader to imagine what Thomas Merton would be thinking in listening to Bob Dylan, especially in connection with his relationship with Margie. He asks us to imagine Merton buying Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* as an indulgence, saying, "but it's not as though Dom James is still looking over his shoulder" (177). I get from Merton's writing that he would be more inclined to think, "It's as though God is lovingly gazing at us in perpetuity." Finally, in a footnote in the thirteenth and last chapter, the author acknowledges that he has dramatized a scene: "Though the scene is dramatized, Merton purchased these records on this day, most likely at Vine Records" (224). Too little, too late, is what I thought when I read that footnote.

As for what the book claims to be about, the similarities and coupling of two unique American figures who represent "spiritual and artistic genius," the comparisons are helpful and informed. Without a doubt, Bob Dylan is the most important musical figure of the last century. But for every similarity Hudson develops: iconic, celebrated, despised, we could easily forge major differences. Merton is authentic to the core: what you see is what you get; his writing is transparent. Dylan, as Hudson notes, has always been happily enigmatic. Also, he is in fact in-authentic, shape-shifting and deliberately cagey. He stole from other artists, notably Dave Von Ronk. He never explained to Joan Baez why she was no longer a significant part of his life. His writing is mostly hyperbolic, and, in reading Dylan's prose, we can expect that we will be beholden to his retrospective imagination, and that is okay. Though Hudson claims he is original, he traditions much of the American idiom; in fact, I might interpret his life's work as a testimony that originality is an illusion. Merton is far less enigmatic, far more clear in his expressions. Merton is an artist as a result of his religious commitments; Dylan became religious as a result of his artistic commitments. There is a big difference here, and Christian interpreters of rock-n-roll tend to conflate the two, just as secularists conflate religion and institutionalism. Hudson makes much of Dylan's influence on Merton's *Cables to the Ace*. More than once, the author boosts his argument with the criterion that if Merton is journaling about something/someone at the time of his formal writing, that is evidence of the primary influence in the monk's creative process and production. That is how he claims that Dylan, more than the philosopher Marcuse, the anti-poet Parra and the poet Cardenal, shines as the brightest and most significant influence on Merton's 1968 publication. Here is the author's myopathy at its most pronounced. First, who is to say an author such as Thomas Merton would not have his past journals at hand to re-engage with his own and others' thoughts? And more importantly, it seems to me that the writing life is one of great integration, an appropriation of years of contemplation, insight and foresight. Why does Hudson need to place Bob Dylan first in the hierarchy of influences?

As "anti-poetry" *Cables to the Ace* pre-figures the abuse of language in the post-modern period. The poetry is an attempt to reveal the shallow and self-enclosed use of language in advertisements, news reports, euphemisms, overwrought idioms and images. By bringing Bob Dylan and Thomas Merton together, Hudson demonstrates how each had a sense of the destructive in the shallow, the poverty in material consumption. But in reading the book I also felt as though the author was enclosed in his own life-world, his own movie. Certainly it was a movie well researched, with a beautifully written script, yet I found that the depth of its content did not match the extent of its footnotes and bibliography.

A reflection on the cover art of the book can sum up this review. The illustration was done by André Carrilho, a Portuguese caricaturist and illustrator who is in the vanguard of hip, relevant,

politically astute cartoons and caricatures. His art is distinctive and recognizable, having appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Fortune*, *GQ*, among many other media. On the front cover, Merton stands above Dylan, who seems to be ducking out of the way, but it is the album, a halo-record surrounding Merton's head, that draws our attention upward toward the title. An interpretation is that Dylan's music made Merton holy, enlightened him toward the very end of his life. That may be, along with a thousand and one other dimensions of his experience. The cover art is a caricature; it borders on cartoonish. That is how I found some of this book, a watered down, reductive, self-selected interpretation of the subject matter, codifying and projecting interpretations that fit the caricature long discovered in the author's mind. Like a stereotype, there is some truth in a caricature, but none of us wants to be measured by these predictable narratives drummed up by media, image makers, marketing. I commend the author for creatively connecting these two American gems. And I appreciate his musical and spiritual sensibilities, evinced by his beautiful prose. I just wonder if his imagination might present a thin picture of history.

A lyric from Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man" comes to mind here. Hudson claims that Merton heard its refrain clearly and immediately as applied to his relationship with Margie; he claims, "For Merton, it was pure poetry, new and thrilling" (104). The song is Dylan's response to a reporter who comes around to interview him and his posse and Dylan rejects him – the song's refrain: "There's something happening, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones." It holds searching journalists, those who want a quick, flashy story, in the tone of contempt. You don't want to be accused with Mr. Jones, dear author, by an opining and whining Bobby Dylan, as he confronts the thin man in another line from the song: "You have many contacts, among the lumber-jacks, to get you facts, when someone attacks your imagination." Do you, Mr. Hudson?