

Reviews

Lawrence S. Cunningham, editor. *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1992. 437 pages. \$14.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Walter E. Conn

This may be the book bargain of the year: two books in one modestly priced volume. For, in addition to over 350 pages of selected writings by Merton, the buyer also gets about eighty choice pages of editorial commentary and apparatus: a brief foreword by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.; a short preface by Anne E. Carr; a long introduction (and brief introductory notes to each selection) by Lawrence Cunningham; a five-page chronology of Merton's life; and a six-page select bibliography of books by and about Merton.

Perhaps we should consider the Merton writings first. I will focus on the list of items selected, knowing that their substance needs no recommendation to readers of the *The Merton Annual*. The editor's precise intention was to bring together the essential writings of Merton specifically as "spiritual master," not to produce another general *Thomas Merton Reader*. Cunningham explains the systematic process of consultation he employed to avoid an idiosyncratic selection. The method worked: given the limitations of space, most readers will find little to quibble about. The selections are divided into two groups: Autobiographical Writings (arranged chronologically) and Spiritual Writings (ranging from 1958 to 1968, but arranged in only a rough chronological order).

Not surprisingly, the autobiographical group begins with about forty pages from *The Seven Storey Mountain* (part two, ch. 1, sec. ii-v) where Merton recounts the friendships and other influences at Columbia leading up to his declaration to Father Ford at Corpus Christi: "Father, I want to become a Catholic." Next we find "Fire Watch, July 4, 1952," the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*. Next comes about forty pages

from the first half of part three of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which include the "Fourth and Walnut" conversion. This selection is followed by some fifty pages from the posthumously published *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964–1965*, covering New Year's Day to Easter, 1965. Then we have the complete text of the short essay *Day of a Stranger*, a 1965 piece detailing life in his new hermitage. This autobiographical group ends with selections from *The Asian Journal*, including the Polonaruwa experience.

The group of Spiritual Writings begins with several sections from the second part of *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958): "The Love of Solitude." It also includes "The General Dance" from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the prose-poem "Hagia Sophia," the introductory essay from *The Wisdom of the Desert*, and "Herakleitos: A Study" from *The Behavior of Titans*. A particularly valuable inclusion (more than sixty pages) in this group is "The Inner Experience," the first four parts of a 1959 manuscript on contemplation in which Merton tried to augment Neo-Scholastic formulations with insights from Eastern mystics. This important transitional work was previously available only in back issues of *Cistercian Studies* (complete) and in *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* by William H. Shannon (selected passages). The work of Merton's later years is represented by "Learning to Live" from *Love and Living*, "Contemplation in a World of Action" and "Is the World a Problem" from *Contemplation in a World of Action*, "Rain and the Rhinoceros" from *Raids on the Unspeakable*, and "A Christian Looks at Zen" from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Finally, in "A Letter on the Contemplative Life" and the co-authored "Contemplatives and the Crisis of Faith," we have, from the year before his death, Merton's long-held consistent view on the search for God: one who risks entering and sharing the solitude of the heart begins to understand what is beyond words—"the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and he are in all truth One Spirit" (427). Obviously, both groups of generous selections are packed with vintage stuff.

Now for a few words about the other book in this volume—the editorial material. Brother Patrick Hart's helpful foreword focuses on Merton's duties in the 1950s and 1960s as master of scholastics and master of novices at Gethsemani, vitally important experience for the transformation of his life and writing. Anne Carr's extraordinarily rich preface zeroes in on Merton's key distinction between the false self

and the true self: "Genuine autonomy is found only in self-forgetfulness . . ." (10).

Finally, Lawrence Cunningham has written what is not only a superb introduction to this collection of writings, but a penetrating literary and theological introduction to Merton's life and work. An opening section sketches the broad lines of Merton's life, explicating both its American and cosmopolitan dimensions. There follows a section on Merton "The Monk" in which Cunningham argues that monasticism, a fundamental way of being a Christian, is the interpretative key to understanding the many Mertons. "Thomas Merton as Theologian" explains Merton's dual theological education: the official Neo-Scholastic manuals of his studies for the priesthood and his voracious reading in monastic and mystical literature. Cunningham argues for Merton as a monastic theologian, attempting to know the self in order to know God, focusing on the *experience* of God's loving presence, struggling to bridge the gap between "theology" and "spirituality," between head and heart. A section on "Merton the Social Critic" explains Merton's social involvement as intrinsic to his evolved understanding of monastic life: "His life was to be a 'No!' to everything that hid the beauty of [the] world as it came from the hands of God and had been redeemed in Christ" (44). In "Merton and the East," Cunningham presents Merton as a new kind of monk, extending the boundaries of the contemplative life, reaching for levels of spiritual development which are "universally recognizable" though culturally and doctrinally diverse (46). A final section considers Merton as a "Spiritual Master," a great teacher who has mastered a doctrine and a way of life. I cannot think of any interested reader—from novice to master—who will not learn much from this introduction.

Thomas M. King, S.J. *Merton Mystic at the Center of America*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier Books, 1992 [vol. 14, *The Way of the Christian Mystics*]. 160 pages. \$12.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J.

This book on Thomas Merton as a mystic at the center of North America reveals the unity of his spirituality. It discusses four basic