

America, and North American culture. The bibliographical apparatus at the back is simple and straightforward. It invites us to be mystics in and of North America.

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William H. Shannon *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*. New York: Crossroad, 1992. 304 pages. \$22.95.

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### ***Jamais Vu: A Thomas Merton We Have Not Seen***

William H. Shannon calls Thomas Merton "easily the most important and influential writer on the life of the spirit in the twentieth century" (13). If this is so, one must welcome this new book into the virtual library on Merton and discover on what shelf in that variegated room it might go.

The book turns out to be a unique study. The author calls it a "reflective biography" (7), because he chooses carefully significant events and experiences of Merton's life to organize his thoughts and to guide his considerations toward some definite statements about his subject. Shannon's work does not replace and, indeed, does not approach in literary elegance Michael Mott's exhaustive biography *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), but it does assume the advantage of consulting all that has already been written in order to forge some new convictions about Merton. Shannon's book has the perspective of time. His purpose is nothing less than to trace the development of Merton's spiritual journey. For Merton's was not just a boat with wild sails on an open sea, but a sturdy bark with a powerful engine determined to reach the appointed shore. Certain of his circumstances, he designed his ship and furnished it and occasionally offered it some serious frustration. But on the whole, Merton was a fortunate man—even a chosen vessel, whose course was marked out for him long before he realized it. One has to look deeper into the mystery of Merton's relationship with God in order to dis-

cern the course his voyage took. We are just now at a place to begin to appreciate this and we can be grateful to Shannon for starting us off.

William H. Shannon was for a long time a professor at Nazareth College, Rochester, New York. His Merton studies have put him in the forefront of the field. For example, he is the general editor of the Merton correspondence, a formidable task, since the Merton output continues to astonish the computer dependent. More than all this, Shannon speaks from the vantage point of American Catholic culture, where he is almost a contemporary of his subject, and certainly a sympathetic one (8).

In order to pursue his objectives, Shannon considers the Merton story against the background of the Catholic Church and the changes that it underwent before and through the Second Vatican Council. This includes the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance and its reappropriation of its twelfth-century heritage and, further back, the primary ascetic tradition of the Greek and Egyptian East. Finally, he has a keen eye for western culture itself, as it moves through profound upheavals, which cannot fail to bring their influence to bear on any evaluation of Merton.

The tale can be told only by one who has shared the experience and gotten the meaning. Shannon's book does not pretend to compete with the well-known biographies and studies of Merton, but, on the contrary, will probably introduce a new spate of Merton studies which take as their premises these convincing themes:

(1) that Merton's life was a success because his spirituality came to view an ever-widening horizon and even glimpsed the peaks of universal truth.

(2) that Merton remained essentially faithful to his monastic vocation. This is the thesis that best accounts for all the known facts of Merton's life and thought from his entrance into Gethsemani to his death in far-off Bangkok (no mean feat for any thesis!)

(3) that Merton picked up the torch of human existence as he found it and with the insatiable thirst for transcendent truth and silence that could have come to him from God alone, he made his very life into a lamp for those with him and after him. Merton, as a spiritual guide, can be

trusted because his life was authentic. We come to him to hear the unspeakable and to learn about the unknown.

A refreshing feature of Shannon's work is the chronology which gets interspersed with chapters or blocks of chapters. It provides salient facts and happenings of the time contemporary with the Merton story as well as the cardinal points in Merton's own biography. The chronology frequently reads like a separate work layered through the context of the author's intended presentation of Merton. But the counterpoint between the Merton themes and the world beyond, while attractive and impressionistic, leaves many loose ends untied. Feeling disjointed, we are left to make our own connections between Merton in the monastery and the world outside it. But the chasm is too wide. To be sure, the chronology can serve as a gauge measuring the contemporaneity of Merton's moves and feelings, but it leads us on to other questions. How much was Merton affected by what was going on outside (that is, before the late 1950s and early 1960s)? Even more to the point, how many of Merton's later preoccupations were distilled in the mix of the Gethsemani community life and its particular culture? We need to be better informed about the way all those events of the yearbook affected the monastery in general and Merton in particular. Merton certainly learned of events and was influenced by his generation living beyond the monastery walls by his numerous contacts and reading. But he was also shaped by the men with whom he lived and by the peculiar subculture they created on the margins of society. In a future study, Shannon's chronology might be more selective and more related to Merton and his life at Gethsemani. In this work, the chronology acts like a wayward crutch with a mind of its own when it comes to literary unity.

### **Merton, Contemplation, and Scholasticism**

Father Shannon writes a remarkable paragraph in his introduction (8-9), made sterling by quoting Merton's own poetic images, on the archetypal symbol of "home." Merton had been constantly uprooted during his formative years and remained a wanderer until his stability of twenty-seven years at Gethsemani. But what he had experienced during his first twenty-six years profoundly affected how he would be stationary in Kentucky. Merton interiorized his lessons

in rootlessness. He learned to avoid calling any place "home." The word, spoken in deprivation and longing, became sacred and equivalent to God. The wound, once so great, now was the sign of redemption. For it carried him past the clutches of human habitation and gravitational points dear to our kind, onto the transcendent nature of God. This contemplative theme gets well-earned attention in the pages to follow.

Our author writes of an "ascetic atmosphere of the pre-Vatican II Church" (130). If the Church was ascetic, monasticism certainly had a lot to do with it. Quite simply, asceticism is an essential ingredient to monasticism. If Merton suffered a certain ambivalence toward his writing because he was trying to become a monk, he was probably being faithful to his monastic calling, just as others in the Church were offering sacrifices in the spirit of the general spirituality of the time. However, that Merton came to see the difficulty of squaring monastic life with a writing career as a *pseudoproblem* is a *non-sequitur* (135). The problem does not go away in any monk's life. One refines the ambivalence. One trusts one's experience to go on writing (if we are a Merton), but the ascetic effort remains and needs to become transformed as one's art develops. Integration of one's gifts into one's personality does not mean the demise of asceticism or that one should have never allowed the specter of the sacrifice of one's art to come and haunt. One must first determine how essential the gift is to one's personality, or, in other words, whether Christ's call includes the gift with its own new ascetical demands.

The contemplation-art dichotomy, clearly set forth by our author (136) represents another and separate issue. The blurring of the scholastic focus in Merton's development and his growing awareness and trust in a more integrated, if less predictable experience, is valid for all of us in the latter decades of the twentieth century. So is the liberation from repressive and over-generalized ascetic practices, practiced for their own sake, which apparently plagued the Catholic Church at large as it hastened to find shelter from a secularly rampant culture in a safe if windless port before the Second Vatican Council (161-63).

But Scholasticism is not thereby dismissed from the podium of truth. It must still have something to say, if it was ever valid, though perhaps in a different way. Art, considered in our time as the apogee of self-expression, is going to appear oversized and delinquent in any Scholastic or Neo-Scholastic scheme, while, in an early medieval mind

set (that is, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, before the Scholastic period) it is going to appear in scale and tame. That Merton's perspectives on art and contemplation shifted during his lifetime, states only that our philosophic framework has also shifted. But to what it has shifted, if it indeed has moved to a definite place, no one can as yet say. And if monasticism is no longer the predominant charisma in the Church, its preternatural emphasis on asceticism need no longer be broadly or rigidly applied by people outside a monastery cloister.

Artists join together contemplation and art in one way. Surely, monastics join them in another. What Merton achieved in his own life, in his period and in the given ecclesial situation, may be directive for those in his own milieu in and out of monasticism. Yet monastics of a later time must continue to pose the question of how they should be ascetics and artists, and how asceticism and art prepare them for the gift of contemplation. The distinction between monastic and other contemplatives was perhaps rightly not Shannon's concern. Yet it needs to be the concern in any future study of Merton by a monastic.

### Merton and Monastic Renewal

Merton's critique of community as he knew it in a crowded and fast-changing Gethsemani is not to be taken lightly (147-60, 248-62). Apparently, the routine of observances in the Gethsemani of the time was still largely considered to be the end in itself and not yet enough the means to contemplation. The priority which contemplative prayer enjoys in our Order today is in no small way due to Merton, his teaching, writing, and influence. But the issue is not black and white. Merton's contemporaries in the monastery undoubtedly enjoyed contemplation. Yet who will deny that the life was heavily structured? The debate here is on emphasis, focus, and a changing cultural climate both sacred and profane. Some in our Order today look back longingly to the days when there existed structures, schedule, and symbolic rituals aplenty. After the demise of many usages, some of them assuredly formalistic, monastics tend to read back into them meanings and significance which they scarcely enjoyed when they were actually lived. Despite the nostalgia, very few in our monasteries today consider a mere return to a former observance a desirable thing. To a great extent, the new approach to the monastic life which Merton hoped for (Is it exactly what he hoped for?) has come about in the legis-

lation of the General Chapters of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance in the years following 1967. Still, Merton's strident criticisms of community life as it was then seem a bit curious to a later generation of monastics.

### Merton the Solitary

Father Shannon lumps together in one chapter (13) Merton's efforts on behalf of monastic renewal and his move to the solitude of the woods in 1965. One gets the impression that the eremitical life holds the key to a successful redrawing of cenobitic life, and very well it may. Several ideas set forth here in this chapter, however, need to be examined.

Merton says that in the woods, he is a "nobody" (251) and the seclusion of the hermitage no doubt gave him the anonymity he sought. But many monks find the routine of the community, the good zeal of monks which honors the other brother's opinion, and the humility of silence, including the voluntary avoidance even of sign language, a sure way to anonymity in the community and total dependence on God. What stands revealed is the intense inner life with God that leaves no room for ambition, no desire for any office or charge in the monastery, no need for publication. The far greater challenge is to remain in the cloister and confront the demons of power and sway, taste and the will to influence. Let the one who can accept this grace do so. For those who possess great gifts from God, the way is usually to shoulder responsibility for using these gifts effectively. The time may come, even for these, to leave off the exercise of responsibility, as Merton did, when he exited community life. But for the majority of monks, there remains the great anonymity of the cenobitic life, with its poverty of will, schedule, and autonomy. The life of continual solitude away in a hermitage represents a different dimension.

In fact, the eremitical life follows on the successful struggle in community against one's own demons and the *powers of the air*. This traditional transition from one to the other, as embodied in *Rule of St Benedict* (=RSB) seems lost in Shannon's chapter 13. The discussion of the Antonian form of monastic life underwent a much further development in Evagrius and Cassian before it was ever taken up by the RSB or by any later monastic reform. As an inspiration, it has progeny like Abraham, but as a direct model, it is a distant ancestor. Merton's

move to solitude may have been just the shot in the arm that institutional monasticism of the time would respond to. In this, he was a prophet, as in almost everything else he did. But his *transitus* to the woods is hardly an object for broad imitation. Merton himself did not do all that well in solitude. The last pages of the Mott biography do not make for edifying reading. This fact does not neuter the salutary effect of Merton's eremitical life for himself or for the Cistercian Strict Observance or for his readers. The hermit life is now officially recognized in the Constitutions of our Order [See CST 13, St 13.3.A], and a large part of the credit for it is due to Merton and his disciples. Still, the hermit life has not replaced the cenobitic life, to any significant degree. It continues to be rare because so few do well in extreme solitude. In sum, applying the eremitical life as a balm to an ailing cenobitism is a far too simplistic operation.

### **Merton the Visionary**

By moving to the woods, Merton only heightened the already existing tension in his life between the anonymity needed for contemplative prayer and his call and "mission" to the world. Given the evidence of his ultimate monastic fidelity, and his extraordinary honesty and self-knowledge, one is convinced that he would have kept thriving spiritually on this paradox and would have eventually overcome it in his own person. In the meantime, he remains a riddle, an incarnated koan that will continue to fascinate and impart wisdom.

After the initial hurdles in monastic life had been cleared, as Father Shannon demonstrates, toward 1957–1958, Merton's broader vocation *ordini et orbi* (to the Order and to the world) accelerated with savage and exhilarating speed. In ten short years until his death in 1968, he catapulted a large portion of the monastic tradition into the contemporary world. The intense, briefer final chapters of Shannon's book (chapters 11–14 and the conclusion) trace the trajectory that Merton's life ultimately became. They are a vindication of the author's purpose in presenting his work and make for fascinating and thought-provoking reading.