

Bonaventure, he finally summoned up the courage to ask one of the friars, Father Philotheus, who promptly told him that no such impediment existed. He writes to Gethsemani and awaits the answer. It is on this note of expectancy, and with a prayer that he may renounce everything and belong entirely to the Lord, that this impressive Journal concludes.

One regret I must express. The footnotes are few, the index is skimpy. I presume this was an editorial policy (the publisher's perhaps?). More generous footnotes clarifying names, places, topics, and a more extensive index would have assisted the serious reader and enhanced the book's value. But, that being said, readers can approach this Journal with high expectations. They will not be disappointed.

III

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It is Saturday, September 30, 1939, a damp early autumn evening in New York City. The twenty-four-year-old Thomas Merton returns to his small room on Perry Street. He is cold, tired, perhaps a bit hungry, but he decides to write for a while in the new journal he started in the spring. "I don't really feel like writing anything much at all. Can't feel that anything I would write down would have any importance" (30). He remembers then, suddenly, that "there is one good thing to be thankful for to God: . . . found out about Saint Philomena" (30), and in recalling this "blessed little Saint, flower of martyrs" (30), Merton realizes "what excuse is there for misery and unhappiness then, when there is the intercession before the throne of God of such a saint as this" (31):

Not only her, then, but all the Saints; not only the saints, but the angels, and above the angels, their Queen, Mary, the Mother of God and Queen of heaven sitting before the throne of God above the nine choirs and the seraphim, all filled with love and mercy and interceding for us before God himself who loves us most of all, because in Him is all love, and he gave his body and blood in sacrifice for us upon the cross. But that body and blood, that sacrifice is daily perpetuated in the churches, and the church herself is there, a great everlasting source of wisdom and consolation (31).

And at the close of his journal entry, what we might more properly call a meditation, Merton is able to write with complete joy and confidence: "And now I am glad to have written something" (31).

This episode is but one of many gifts offered in *Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume I 1939–1941*, and it indicates several of the themes that appear in the journal, as well as throughout the more mature work of Merton's vocation. The journal is a wonderful example of the medieval mindset—live wholeheartedly in the physical world while remaining spiritually detached from it—that fascinated and delighted Merton. It is a vivid depiction, a valid historical document of life at one of the most exciting and terrifying moments of the twentieth century, a testament to the love of God, and a search for what that God wills. It becomes a kind of survival manual for the soul and for the imagination, and it affirms the presence of both, in a world that no longer attaches much significance to either. Above all, the journal demonstrates what Merton's life and vocation as a monk and artist would come to exemplify—that conversion is a process, a developing, continuous miracle.

Editor Patrick Hart divides this volume, the first of seven to be published, into three sections: Perry Street, which covers May 1939–February 1940; The Cuban Interlude, written between February 1940 and May 1940; and St. Bonaventure's, New York, the journal Merton kept between June 1940 and December 1941. In each section, the voice of the young Thomas Merton reveals itself as at times perceptive and curious, at other moments as slightly pretentious, even unsure. But throughout the journals of 1939–1941, one gets a sense of a sensitive, deeply thoughtful young man certain of one thing: the need to serve God by finding his vocation within the Church.

In reading Merton's private meditations, we, of course, have the benefit of knowing where he is headed; that is one of the pleasures of reading any journal. When Merton longs to enter the cloister and prays, "If God only would grant it! If it were only his will" (458), we know that far away in Kentucky, the monks at Gethsemani are praying for the same thing, and we know of the vocation Merton will have there. Yet one cannot help feeling that somehow Merton knows, too. "I know I want to be a Trappist. I remember the terrific sense of holiness and peace I got when I first stepped inside Gethsemani" (457). The entire journal is really a search for this; the desire was there all the time. On September 8, 1939, for example, Merton sits in his room, surrounded by the works of the saints, happy in the knowledge that "they

are hearing confessions now at Saint Francis' church. Everywhere, tomorrow morning, Masses" (20). "Here is liberty," he writes. "All I have to do is to be quiet, sit still" (20). Silence. Solitude. Contemplation. Merton fulfilled all these desires within monasticism, an institution we sometimes ironically view as an escape into isolation. Yet the paradox of the monastic life in relation to the modern world is that in an ancient, separate way of life there is a greater sense of genuine community than any of us in the consumer culture will ever know. So while we often portray Merton as a quiet individual seeking total isolation from others, the journals show us a man who needed and wanted a sense of belonging, of community.

This desire to be part of the world, to experience fellowship with others, while at the same time having solitude, is a theme that runs throughout Merton's later work; indeed, it defines his work, for in writing Merton was able to communicate with the outside world, even while he was cloistered. This theme is present throughout the journals as well, and it makes for some of the most interesting and entertaining reading in the book. Merton has a gift for making wonderful stories out of the most ordinary, commonplace events, and all of these episodes in the journal—drinking wine with a peasant, attending a showing of *Gone With the Wind*, viewing the Picasso exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art—exhibit Merton's Whitmanesque fascination with people.

It is another kind of paradox. Even as he is making preparation to leave the world, Merton immerses himself in it. He has a writer's eye; he notices physical details, language, mannerisms. Though he is often critical of people, he ultimately has a great deal of love for them, and his observance of others always leads him toward a greater awareness of himself and his vocation. Consider for example the Italian peasant from whom Merton buys firewood:

He is a very remarkable guy, to be a peasant in the middle of the city and still completely a peasant. . . . The kind of a guy that is the same as though he were still on his land with his wife and kids and his vines and his olives and his beasts . . . and is humble and poor in Spirit too and loves God and prays to Him like a child. . . . If I were to be a good Franciscan, that is, Christlike, I would first of all have to be in almost all points as this peasant appears to be . . . this peasant, obscure and dark, and silent, and not knowing much how to talk: of such were Christ's Apostles (70).

In this episode, and in others like them, Merton has a great sense of character. At the Picasso exhibit, Merton is irritated by an audience that includes an "old man, highly excited, running among the pictures like a dog with his tail between his legs," "a Harvard type, very pimply, who read out the names of the pictures very loudly and then laughed after each name," artists and intellectuals, "all the wiseguy fat people with their witty remarks," and "the 'cultured people,' the fops, the Yale fribbies and the hundreds and hundreds of bleak ugly wives of Park Avenue dentists, and the whole club of reviewers, and the Village boys" (89–91). Yet even after this diatribe, a rather mean-spirited categorization (with which we nevertheless find ourselves smiling and agreeing), Merton is capable of tenderness:

There must have been dozens of quiet people saying nothing but loving the pictures. I am sure there were. You would not notice them . . . but I did see two girls go quietly across one of the rooms with very shining eyes and expressions of wonder and delight: they were as beautiful as anything, just because of that (91).

Another more personal episode exhibits a similar sensitivity. On January 5, 1940, Merton takes his novel to Macmillan. He imagines the man who will read his manuscript as "not any fierce expert fellow . . . not some dim-witted illiterate, with a rolling head full of teeth that snaggle and snarl at my book" (127). Instead, Merton decides:

He is a guy who wants to be happy and wants to go to heaven and be blessed, and he wants to love people and he makes mistakes that confuse him and he gets embarrassed and he gets sick and has pains and wonders where his money is coming from next. And he sure wants to read a good book (127).

In other words, he is a lot like Merton. This kind of identification with others is crucial to the journal and may be interpreted in a variety of ways. Of course, Merton is using the journal as an artist's workbook. He's practicing characterizations, and he's working with dialogue and situations, but there is something else important about this observation. For one, Merton senses throughout this period that "there is nothing for [him] but to pray and do penance and belong to Christ in poverty, in my whole life and without compromise" (315); in a sense, then, his observation of people becomes like a subconscious kind of goodbye. For another, it exhibits one of the great paradoxes of the modern world, a world crowded with more people than ever be-

fore who have forgotten how to communicate with one another. The desire may exist, but the retreat into the self makes it impossible to communicate. Merton, however, begins to arrive at a more optimistic view of this alienation:

The world is full of the terrible howling of engines of destruction, and I think those who preserve their sanity and do not go mad or become beasts will become Trappists, but not by joining an order, Trappists in secret and in private—Trappists so secretly that no one will suspect they have taken a vow of silence . . . we must seek silence (267).

This is a crucial realization for Merton to achieve. Essentially, in this journal he is watching a silent world, an enormous populace that, whether at the movies or at an art exhibit or in the publishing houses, has lost something. Merton criticizes and applauds the ways we've tried to improve upon this loss or ignore it all together. He attacks the futility of ceremony, saying, "All these modern ceremonies are rotten because their only reason for existing is a vague feeling 'that there ought to be some sort of ceremony'" (255). At the same time, he is fascinated by spaces, public and private, particularly churches, that reflect the modern desire for a simultaneous solitude and involvement. At the Church of La Reina in Cuba, for example, Merton is most moved by the building's ability to "communicate a terrific sense of the reality of God's power as something that moves with deep might in the most secret places of every person's self" (199).

What Merton is struggling toward in his examination of the modern psyche really seems to be a concept of prayer, a prayer as he writes on September 2, 1941, that "gives the spirit a sense of liberation and of freedom" (393). True prayer is, after all, concerned not only with the relationship between God and the self, but also with how the larger world experiences God. In this sense, Merton's journal is best seen as a kind of prayer, for it moves quite consciously through doubt and vanity and darkness into the light of the knowledge that it is only through communion with God that we "learn our own identity—truly; we finally see ourselves as we really are!" (398). Yet in the background, always, are other people. As Merton writes, "even the present contemplative orders . . . are societies where men live together" (425). It is therefore easy for Merton to arrive at the Abbey of Gethsemani and pronounce the monastery as "the center of America . . . the axle around which the whole country blindly turns" (333), for he understands that

even in our desperate silence, even in our modern isolation from one another, it is the silence of contemplative prayer that unites us even when we are least aware. Yet still Merton wonders, "Why do I ask myself questions, all the time, about what I ought to be doing? Why am I always unsatisfied, and wanting to know what is my vocation if it is my vocation to stay here reading and praying and writing?" (445). This, too, is a prayer, and as Merton prays throughout this journal we are privileged to approach the same understanding he had at Gethsemani, for now we see his prayers being answered, even when he is unaware.

What Merton had to do as both a writer and as a young man searching for a vocation, indeed what he was already attempting to work out in this early journal, was complicated: he had to find a way to retreat into the silence of the cloister while somehow sharing that silence with the cacophony of the modern world. As a young man, Merton already knew that to understand the modern world and to communicate with it he could not live within it. A perfect metaphor for this realization, the same kind of device Merton would employ in the "Firewatch" sequence in *The Sign of Jonas*, is used when Merton describes his comical search in Cuba for a good Spanish edition of the works of St. John of the Cross. The episode is another fine example of Merton's talent for revealing an element of mystery within the familiar. Browsing through several different book stores becomes frustrating, in a humorous sense; Merton "laughs somewhat in a quiet scholarly way" (183) at a volume called *The Philosophy of Nudism*. Eventually Merton gives up, especially after what looks to be "a huge shiny big bookstore!" (183) turns out to be a department store. Later he learns that "there is also another department store in Havana called 'La Filosofia.' It would have been funnier if I had run into that one first" (184). The point is obvious and serious, even though it is rendered in a comical manner. Even in a Catholic country, the modern world cannot fully satisfy what the individual really needs.

Certainly, as Merton acknowledges, "The only happiness I have known in the last six years has had some connection with my conversion, and has been tied up with the increase in my belief and my desire to serve God" (137). This is an important observation, for it indicates an early understanding of what Merton would in a sense spend his life as a monk and writer defining. An essential link exists between conversion and vocation; one cannot last without remaining true to the spirit of the other. Conversion as Merton would come to

understand it, and as any convert to the faith must also comprehend, becomes most rewarding when it is viewed as a miraculous journey. Any true conversion goes through some initial stages of development, however, and these stages are all in evidence here. They include a sense of astonished joy, a feeling of wonder, perhaps even disbelief, at being chosen. After the first excitement begins to decline and the conversion becomes part of routine existence, a convert may experience, as well, feelings of doubt or inadequacy. This marks the first real turning point in conversion, and it was an especially pivotal moment for Merton. At this time, a convert may reject the decision; it may become simply another interest, or even a diversion. For true conversion to continue, the convert must develop a vocation that serves, among other purposes, to preserve and further the initial joy felt upon conversion. Furthermore, true conversion seeks community; it can never be fully realized in isolation, though a foundation in solitude is beneficial. All of this, of course, applies to Merton, and it is all described within the journal.

Most readers of this essay are well aware of the background to Merton's own conversion to Catholicism in the fall of 1938, especially as it is recounted in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. There he describes his excitement following his conversion, but he also writes about the difficulty he had in making his new faith part of him. Merton was perhaps too hard on himself; all converts experience a strange kind of alienation from the faith that continues to excite them. Assimilating all the relevant theology and scholarship quickly is daunting if not impossible, and customs and traditions are difficult to absorb. A convert feels a certain degree of loneliness following the conversion, but it is a necessary solitude. And if the convert happens to be an artist, as Merton was, another kind of challenge is presented: how does the artist incorporate a new faith into a new art?

Merton began writing not long after the era of High Modernism, and not long before the new Beat aesthetic; caught between two artistic movements, and still under the spell of Blake, whose work best exemplifies the visionary nature of art, the young writer seems to sense here, even in the pages of his private journal, the need to balance form with content while at the same time attempting to incorporate aspects of his new faith into his writing. A fine example of what Merton wanted to do in his writing appears early in the journal, in an entry that deals with Merton's idea that "art is a virtue, nourished, and infused and entertained by God" (36):

The craftsman who thinks he possesses his craft, and loses his patience and humility and love that are necessary to it, loses his art: the theory today is that artists by their own will and own supreme human understanding can be artists: so there is very little art and a lot of pride and bad pictures and quarrelling (36).

It was a difficult proposition; in prose, as Merton himself often admitted of his early work, he was not always up to the task. One notices here, in entry after entry, that often when Merton turns to a Catholic theme, he has a tendency to become overwrought and pious; he soars to angelic flights of fancy, and the end result is not unlike what one might find in religious tracts and pamphlets at the back of a church. This should not be viewed as a fault, however, for Merton does what any exceptional artist must do. The journal becomes a workshop, a place to experiment with new forms and new influences.

There are instances, however, where Merton is able to balance form, content, and faith, and the results are startling. Consider, for example, Merton's poem on pages 116-7, which comes at the end of his sketch for "a short story about a hermit" (114). Translated into English from the Latin, the poem relies upon repetition of the phrases "now let us go . . . let us bless," which lend it a meditative quality. Thematically, the poem is about the desire for silence:

Let us walk in
this beautiful stillness
let us say "Ave Maria"
let us say "Ave Maria"
Walk in the precious stillness:
Take up your own delicate flight (117).

It is a fine short poem, which lends validity to Patrick Hart's claim that "Perhaps [Merton's] best writing can be found in the journals, where he was expressing what was deepest in his heart" (xii). It also introduces a number of quintessential Merton themes: a desire for silence, a simultaneous need for solitude and community, the liberation afforded by prayer. All of these themes are, as well, concerns of a convert, especially when one views conversion as a journey.

Coming to the realization that one could have a dual vocation was a critical revelation for Merton, but it was also a difficult process, one plagued by doubt and anxiety. These misgivings about serving God as both monk and writer followed Merton into the monastery, where he finally became comfortable with reconciling the two, and he

expresses similar worries here. In several instances in this journal, Merton is highly critical of himself not only as a writer, but as a Catholic as well. Early in the journal Merton already knows what he desires; he wants to be "a good poet, a good priest" (40), yet being both at once will prove arduous. "I am ashamed to start out talking about writing instead of writing about God. . . . I have also been ashamed to pray for my books and my poems to be published" (392-3, 396), writes Merton, yet he also acknowledges that:

whatever writing I do is done by God's grace and only through Him: but it is a talent; He has given it to me for Himself, for use, for Him. . . . But I ask that I write in humility, knowing that I am nothing, that all my desire to write comes from God's grace. . . . Once I have written what I have written, what have I to ask, what is there left, except that the writings be disposed of according to God's will. . . . I would pray to be the best writer of a certain time and never to know it, and to be also the most obscure (397).

This is a beautiful example of the struggle Merton faced in being torn between the two things he loved the most, and it is typical of the journal in that even after writing what is essentially a prayer, even after reaching what seems to be a reconciliation, Merton thinks the very next day, "I am disgusted to read myself writing like an ascetic when I have never suffered anything or denied myself anything . . . what I have written is cheap and sloppy and, compared with what I want to say, phony" (401).

Of course, Merton is being unrealistic. He's comparing himself with Thomas á Kempis, and while such comparisons may be valuable for a young writer, in Merton's case they are often damaging. In praying that God strip away his pride and make him humble, Merton worries, "I wish I could write it better out of respect for God . . . it would be better to write about it in good words, not cheap words. . . . Holy Father, pray that I may write simply and straight anything I ever have to write, that no dishonor come to God through my writing rubbish about him" (406).

Almost a month later Merton writes, "The purest activity is contemplation" (425). It marks a tremendous step forward in his conversion, for he is beginning to sense how he might be a writer as well as a Trappist. Self knowledge has failed him:

The one thing that most appals me is my own helplessness and stupidity: a helplessness and stupidity that come from a complete and total and uncompromising self reliance that, to the world,

appears to be a virtue in me, and a great source of strength! What a lie and what a crazy deception that is: to be self reliant is to be strong and smart: to be self reliant will get you through all your problems, without too much difficulty or anguish (456).

Merton comes, then, to the realization that only God can assist him: "In a question like that of a vocation the danger is met with faith and patience and humility and love and constant prayer, and in time the answer comes clear" (448).

It is a moment of recognition that all converts, indeed any person of faith, must come to repeatedly; Merton reaches it here for the first time. Yet as soon as he seems to have peace, he arrives at the next paradox. At Gethsemani Merton thinks:

there will be no more future—not in the world, not in geography, not in travel, not in change, not in variety, conversations, new work, new problems in writing, new friends, none of that: but a far better progress, all interior and quiet!!! If God only would grant it! If it were only his will (458).

Isolation is valuable, especially for a convert. It affords time to think, to pray, to meditate. Yet, as Merton knows, "we reach contemplation, it seems, through acts of our own. But the strength to carry out those acts, and their success, depend on God's grace and His will. What are the acts His will drives us to do? . . . acts of love" (425).

Reading this early journal, we have the benefit of knowing what happens. We know that Merton's decision to enter the monastery was not an escape, but a new beginning, an entrance into a true community that understood more about love and sacrifice and commitment than the modern world will ever comprehend. We know that in his silence, he was able to speak volumes and that his life's work was always an act of love. It took time, of course, for Merton to achieve a true total resignation to the will of God, but at the end of *Run to the Mountain* it is clear he has made the right beginning: "Lord, how little I am! How little I know! . . . Lord! You have left the real beginning of my conversion until now!" (470).

Run to the Mountain, the first volume of a series for which we have waited over twenty-five years, is a gift that promises to be of permanent value to Merton scholars and readers. As a journal, it is of course unpolished. Yet while the entries here were meant as private meditations, the journal is not entirely personal. In these pages, one

realizes that Merton was already beginning to formulate what he wanted to say to the world. The book is filled with "opinions, judgments, arguments" (365) that are often irritating, but we must be patient with Merton as he gradually comes to the understanding, "What does a man want with opinions, if he has beliefs? And if he has beliefs, what is there to argue about?" (365). *Run to the Mountain* should be read as Merton wrote it—as the chronicle of a conversion. Here are the first tentative steps of the journey of the greatest spiritual writer of our time; here too, then, are the pathways of our own individual journeys.