
Thomas Merton. *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 3: 1952–1960. Edited with introduction by Lawrence S. Cunningham. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., General Editor. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996, xviii + 406 pages. \$30.00 hardcover.

Reviewed by Robert Ellsberg

A Search for Solitude, the third volume of Merton's published journals, covers the years 1952 to 1960. Like all Merton's private writings, these journals reflect the paradoxical tension between an outward life of apparent calm and stability and an inner life of intense drama. For a good part of this period Merton served as master of novices. Apart from his monastic duties he carried on a vast array of writing projects (ten books were published in this period). But all the while his interior ruminations reflect an intensive debate about the meaning of his vocation and the question of remaining at Gethsemani. In previous years he had explored the possibility of joining a different monastic community—the Carthusians or Camoldolese, perhaps—which he imagined would afford an opportunity for greater solitude. But now his questions roamed in a different direction, increasingly concerned with the relation of the contemplative vocation to the wider world.

The journals of this period reflect Merton's voracious reading. To his study of the Church Fathers he added Russian spirituality, Berdyaev, Marx, Zen, the novels of Boris Pasternak (with whom, during this period, he established a warm personal relationship), and scores of books on Latin American history and culture. To the suggestion that such topics were not traditional Trappist fare, Merton insisted that "the pleasure of reading and writing poetry within certain limits 'helps me Godward.'" But the struggle to justify his questing and questioning temperament came into increasing tension with the prevailing spirit of the monastery, with its emphasis on rules and submission to the will of God (as defined by the abbot). "My interior life has become a passion, perhaps a guilty passion, for fresh air," he writes.

Upon his first visit to Gethsemani, recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton had looked admiringly on the monastic choir as a great dynamo of prayer. But now the monastery seemed like a different kind of machine, geared to efficiency and profit, epitomized by the

thriving business in cheese. Increasingly he felt oppressed by the lack of spontaneity and freshness. "I think the monastic life as we live it here warps people. Kills their spirit, reduces them to something less than human." He found it intolerable and degrading "to have to spend my life contributing to the maintenance of this illusion. The illusion of the great, gay, joyous, peppy, optimistic, Jesus-loving, one hundred percent American Trappist monastery." Did his superiors fully appreciate the depth of his feelings? If so, it is a wonder that they continued to entrust him with the formation of novices.

In fact, a good deal of this volume is taken up with Merton's desperate fantasies about leaving Gethsemani altogether—to light out for the territories, literally, in some hermitage in Mexico, or Ecuador, or Nicaragua, or even Nevada. While writing letters to bishops around the world and spiritual advisors like Jean Danielou, studying maps, and even checking on airline routes, he explores the possibility of receiving official permission to leave the monastery to pursue the call to greater solitude and authenticity. These efforts are countered by the abbot, the formidable Dom James Fox, who is determined that Merton's true place remains at Gethsemani. Toward the end of this volume Merton's desperation for some resolution to this crisis—any resolution, it seems—has become overwhelming. In this context the arrival of a definitive answer from Rome—no to all thoughts of leaving Gethsemani—leaves Merton strangely calm. "A kind of anesthesia. . . . The letter is obviously an indication of God's Will and I accept it fully. So then what? Nothing. Trees, hills, rain. And prayer much lighter, much freer, more unconcerned, a mountain lifted off my shoulders—a Mexican mountain I myself had chosen."

Actually, Merton himself had entertained the thought that it was perhaps not necessary to leave Gethsemani to find what he wanted. What did he want? Essentially, a greater interior space to define for himself the meaning of his contemplative vocation. This was not a call to leave the monastery but to rediscover its inner meaning—rejecting the "worship of monastic concepts," the mentality of the ghetto, "closed in on itself, interpreting interpretation of interpretations."

In this volume one encounters Merton's original account of his famous experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in downtown Louisville, when he "suddenly realized that I love all the people and that none of them were, or could be totally alien to me. As if waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness, of the 'special' vocation to be different. My vocation does not really make me different from the

rest of men or put me in a special category except artificially, juridically. I am still a member of the human race—and what more glorious destiny is there for man, since the Word was made flesh and became, too, a member of the Human Race."

Even if this is not as polished as the later version in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, it does characterize the shift in Merton's spiritual outlook that underlay the vocational crisis of these years. His earlier sense of the monastic life did certainly stress the "specialness" of this vocation. The challenge now was to find a style of contemplative life that did not rely on the "dream of separateness." Reading his old writing he observes, "I cannot go back to the earlier fervor or the asceticism that accompanied it. The new fervor will be rooted not in asceticism but in humanism." The tension he experiences is the pain of death and rebirth. "I am finally coming out of the chrysalis. . . . Now the pain and struggle of fighting my way out into something new and much bigger. I must see and embrace God in the whole world."

By the end of this period Merton has achieved a degree of peace with his circumstances. By 1960 he is exploring the foundation of the retreat house that will eventually become his hermitage on the monastery grounds. He has observed that "it does not much matter where you are, as long as you can be at peace about it and live your life. The place certainly will not live my life for me, I have found that out. I have to live it for myself." Where will he find the solitude he seeks? "Here or there makes no difference. Somewhere, nowhere, beyond all 'where.' Solitude outside geography or in it. No matter."

And so, after a fairly frantic crescendo, *The Search for Solitude* ends on a remarkably quiet note. If Merton had had his way it would have ended quite differently—in Puerto Rico or some remote island off the coast of Nicaragua. But then perhaps he would not have faced so directly the challenge to find the "solitude outside geography or in it."