

## Reviews

Thomas Merton. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer / The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Two 1941–1952*. Edited by Jonathan Montaldo. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. 501 pages. \$27.50 hardcover.

Reviewed by Jim Grote

One has either got to be a Jew or stop reading the Bible. For the Bible really cannot make sense to anyone who is not spiritually a "Semite." *Salus ex Judaeis*.

Thomas Merton

Jonathan Montaldo's editing of volume two of Merton's journals reflects the monastic virtue of simplicity. His guiding principle of "minimalism" presents Merton to the reader, unencumbered by the distractions of scholarship and footnotes about secondary sources. Montaldo allows Merton to speak directly to the reader.

Volume two of Merton's journals actually includes three separate journals. One, the brief "Novitiate Journal" (only six entries) covers the time from his formal acceptance as a postulant on December 13, 1941 through April 1942 and contains more poetry than prose. Two, "A Journal-Memoir: Dom Frederic Dunne," includes random notes about Merton's first abbot at Gethsemani (with the implication that these notes might be of use someday to a future biographer of Dom Frederic). Three, "The Whale and the Ivy," comprises the vast majority of this volume. Written between December 1946 and July 1952, this journal takes the reader from Merton's fifth anniversary at Gethsemani through his ordination as a priest and his appointment as Master of Scholastics.

Less than half of "The Whale and the Ivy" was originally published in 1953 as *The Sign of Jonas*. It is intriguing to compare *Entering*

*the Silence* to *The Sign of Jonas* and observe Merton's editorial process at work. As Montaldo mentions in his introduction, "The Whale and the Ivy" provides us with "intimate archaeological digs" (xvi) into Merton's personality. The most prominent theme in this volume that Merton excluded from *The Sign of Jonas* is the material on his temptation to leave Gethsemani for the Carthusians.

Many of Merton's entries reflect his three crosses at Gethsemani: "writing, singing, and contemplation" (254). If conflict is the soul of plot, then these conflicts form the soul of this journal. Merton's obedience to his vocation as a writer (which his superiors encouraged [55, 128, 228, 331]) complicated his vocation as a monk. His complaints about the poor singing in choir fill many entries. But his "lamentations about not being a contemplative" (124) are at the core of his conflicts. After reading half of the text, I remarked to my wife: "Merton sure did complain a lot." To which she responded: "I could easily fill seven volumes with your complaints!" Following a brief chapter of faults, I took a vow of silence and resumed reading. While Merton's debates about becoming a hermit eventually subside (cf. 262, 415), they return in later journals.

The intensity of this conflict can be seen in a sample entry: "I am to throw myself away for Gethsemani. I am to face the danger of losing everything that I hold most high, renouncing my ideals of solitude and contemplation to work in distracting tasks that I shall hate in order that others may become in some measure contemplatives, in order that they may have what I so much desire" (88–9). While such a passage might serve as another point of entry into the endless "archaeological digs" into Merton's personality, I think the excavation of his personality was exhausted a long time ago. As Michael Downey argues, Merton studies are in dire need of an "aggiornamento" and a "critical turn" (*The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6, 200).

Merton's conflict between the active and contemplative life possesses a broader significance than the hackneyed psychological speculation in which some of his biographers and critics delight. These conflicts reflect the more profound question that Tertullian and the early Fathers grappled with and, as Merton's life shows, is not resolved to this day. "What, indeed, has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?" (*On the Prescription Against Heretics*, VII). Merton not only reflected on this question, he lived it.

In one journal entry, Merton mentions "a disturbing thesis which . . . says that there is nothing in the Gospel about the

contemplative life and that the whole theory of the contemplative and of contemplation vs. action was developed by the Greek Fathers (e.g., Origen, the first to interpret Martha and Mary in this light)" (347). In another entry he exchanges barbs with a scholar in the *Thomist* who takes him to task for muddling Aquinas's distinctions between the active, contemplative, and mixed vocations (266–71). Neither entry adequately tackles the question of Athens and Jerusalem, of contemplation and charity. A challenge for future Merton studies would be to reexamine this question at length in his writings. I offer the following reflections as an impetus to such a study.

After two millennia of Western monastic tradition, it is natural to forget that contemplation was originally a pagan activity borrowed from the Greeks and justified by less than overwhelming Scriptural evidence. The Scriptures are full of patriarchs, prophets, priests, warriors, lawgivers, kings, apostles, missionaries, etc. But monks? St. John the Baptist is probably the closest thing to a monk that the Scriptures have to offer, but his primary mission was that of a prophet. St. Paul had mystical experiences, but he was a missionary. Christ may have often retreated to a lonely place to pray (e.g., Mark 6:31; Luke 5:15; John 6:15), but he always returned to active ministry.

Scriptural justifications for the contemplative life depend on allegorical interpretation. For example, St. Augustine refers to the use of Greek philosophy as "a spoiling of the Egyptians" (*On Christian Doctrine*, II, 40). The Israelites rejected the idols of the Egyptians, but secretly took with them vases of gold and silver when they fled Egypt (Exod 3:22; 11:2; 12:35). Or, St. Thomas, in his defense of the superiority of the contemplative over the active life, lists eight different arguments from Aristotle, but relies heavily on one passage from Scripture where Mary "figures" the contemplative life (cf. Luke 10:38–42 and *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 182, a. 1). Merton came to question such a traditional interpretation of the Martha and Mary story. By 1959 he would write: "The Gospel of Martha and Mary shows that the one thing necessary is love—not, as usually interpreted, 'The Contemplative Life.' Love whether in contemplation, or in action: love of Christ in Himself and in our brother, that and that alone is the one thing necessary" (Merton, *A Search for Solitude/The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Three 1952–1960*, 262). Merton's questioning of the traditional interpretation leads us to question the medieval synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem.

Contemplation (*theoria*) originates in Athens, not Jerusalem. It is a Greek discovery that corresponds to the Greek discovery of nature

(*physis*). Socrates, the archetypal contemplative in the West, was famous for his fits of abstraction. Socrates showed up late for the most famous drinking party in history because he became lost in contemplation while walking down the street on the way to the party (Plato, *Symposium* 174d). On a military expedition, he entered into a state of contemplation at dawn and remained standing for 24 hours, while the other soldiers stared with amazement (Plato, *Symposium* 220c). Yet Socrates never lived in a monastery. He not only spent his entire life in the city of Athens, but spent his days in its busiest section, the *agora* or marketplace.

Aristotle inherited this tradition of contemplation through Socrates' student, Plato. Aristotle's eight arguments for the superiority of the contemplative life (*Ethics* X, vii–viii) presuppose a pre-Socratic tradition, Pythagoras' doctrine of the Three Lives. Pythagoras compared the three different "types" of men to the kinds of people who attended the Greek festivals: the vendors, the competitors, and the spectators (see Diogenes Laertius VIII, 8). Greek thought translated these three types into the life of Enjoyment, the life of Politics (*bios politikos*), and the life of Contemplation (*bios theoretikos*) (*Ethics* I, v). *Theoria* is a "looking at, viewing, beholding, observing, especially being a spectator at the public games" (Liddel and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*). The Greek word for contemplation (*theoria*) comes from the Greek word for spectators, *theatai*.

Philosophic contemplation (which the monastic tradition later termed natural contemplation [*theoria physike*]) entailed beholding the spectacle of the cosmos itself and its first principles. The Greeks assumed a split between doing and understanding. "As a spectator you may understand the truth of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from it" (Hannah Arendt, *Thinking*, chapter 11). Through contemplation the philosopher literally enters into the life of the divinity, which Aristotle defines as "thought thinking itself" (*Metaphysics* XII, 9). The sole activity of Aristotle's god is contemplation (*Ethics* X, 8). Aristotle's god is the contemplative, *par excellence*.

In his early years as a monk, Merton strove to attain the summit of contemplation. He saw many of his duties at Gethsemani as a distraction from pure contemplation. Later in life, this tension between action and contemplation expressed itself in a completely different way in his life. By 1957 he is making snide comments in his journal about the god of Aristotle (Merton, Vol. 3, 148) and investigating the prophetic side of his monastic vocation (Merton, Vol. 3, 150). "It is

absolutely true that here in this monastery we are enabled to systematically evade our real and ultimate social responsibilities. In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life" (Merton, Vol. 3, 151).

What does the contemplative god of Aristotle have to do with the active God of the Bible? The god of Aristotle meditates on itself and is unconcerned with the changing affairs of humans. The god of Aristotle does not suffer, but is "impassable." The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, however, shows intense concern for humankind (compassion, anger, etc.). God suffers with humanity. The God of the Bible does not attract philosophic contemplation, but commands obedient love. "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8). All the Hebrew prophets call Israel to repent and return to a life of obedient love. But the life of a Hebrew prophet is a far cry from the spectator sport of the Greek philosopher. The Hebrew prophets may have retired to the desert from time to time, but they remained avid participants in the divine drama of the salvation of Israel.

Merton's interest in economics, race relations, and non-violence indicates his growing participation in the affairs of humans. His vocation is gradually transformed from cloistered mystic to social prophet. The transformation reflects the tension built into the vocation of the monk. The monk is a hybrid of the Greek spectator and the Hebrew prophet. The conflict of Athens and Jerusalem is inherent to the monastic vocation.

In order to take Merton seriously, it is necessary to situate his personal "conflicts" within the greater horizon of this complex tradition he inherited, rather than the limited horizon of his biography. The tradition of Christian monasticism requires that each generation examine the foundations of that tradition. The greatest tribute to Thomas Merton is to reflect critically on this tradition. His journals are an invaluable resource for such reflection.