

## Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals; ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 363. \$30.00. ISBN 0-06-065482-1.

I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...

John Keats, letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 1817

For Thomas Merton, the years 1963 through 1965 are marked by 'ambiguity'. Throughout *Dancing in the Water of Life*, Volume 5 of the collected journals, Merton speaks of the inherent ambiguity of his life as a Trappist monk. Writing on the twenty-second anniversary of taking the habit, which he characterizes as 'twenty-two years of relative confusion', Merton compares his life to that of Desiderus Erasmus, who epitomized the struggle to balance the competing claims of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Erasmus, we are reminded, was 'hardly a Christian' from the church's point of view, and in Merton's journals covering his historic removal to the hermitage, Merton feels himself growing increasingly alienated both from his own political causes and from the institutional church. 'I suppose that in some way I have been going through a small spiritual crisis', Merton writes, 'a little more intensified by the "fiftieth year" ... As I go on, the ways of escape are progressively closed, renounced, or otherwise abandoned. I know now that I am really committed to stability here ... [yet] my position is definitively ambiguous'.

The ambiguity can be defined in many ways. Despite the reforms just then being introduced by Vatican II, Merton complains bitterly of the frustrating demands for blind obedience and what he considers the empty formalities of monastic life—'the desperate, maddening obsession with explanation, formulation, declaration'. Merton's resentment of Dom James Fox—which is never far from the surface even in their personal dealings—boils over on to the pages of the journal. Of the abbot, Merton complains, he is 'through and through a business man', and Merton himself feels 'cheated' and 'exploited' in his dealings with the order. Even more disturbing is the thought expressed in 1964 that Dom James might be elected the new Abbot General and Merton himself chosen to replace Dom James. Real or imagined, the very possibility frightens Merton so much that he takes a vow—eventually known to the whole community—that he will not accept election even if it is offered. In his view, it is 'a greater good *not* to accept a position fraught with artificialities and stupidities, with things I do not believe in, and cannot'.

On the other hand, 'I am glutted with books', Merton admits, and feels overwhelmed by the constant distractions of visitors, conferences and correspondence—too little, in other words, of the traditional life of a cloistered monk. Although he does receive and welcome a group of *Hibakusha*—survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—as well as a visit from fellow writer Czeslaw Milosz, for the most part Merton complains that he is 'sick, nauseated with the purposelessness and futility and excess of my activity'. The one exception, and the single instance he is allowed to leave the monastery during this period for any time more than a day, is his trip to New York to visit D.T. Suzuki. Even then, Suzuki's sincere invitation for Merton to visit Japan creates the basis for new conflict. Merton becomes convinced that Dom James's agreeing to allow him a hermitage is in fact part of the Abbot's 'phobia against my traveling'. Again, it is impossible to say just how much of Merton's resentment is based on fact and how much of it is part of Merton's own paranoia. Writing of his trip to New York and saying Mass at Corpus Christi Church, Merton is careful to note, 'No one recognized me or discovered who I was. At least I think not'. Are these the words of a famous writer seeking anonymity or a persecuted priest seeking release? The problem, as Merton correctly points out, is that 'there is no pattern for me to follow ... Hence my fear and guilt, my indecisions, my hesitations ... My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, always seeing the center from somewhere else'.

Responding to a review by Dom Benedetto Calati in *Monastic Studies*, Merton agrees that from a conservative point of view he does not belong to Calati's 'monastic world at all, am no part of it'; at the same time, the self-immolation of a Vietnam protestor from the Catholic Worker makes Merton question his attachment to any organization, liberal or conservative. Living now in solitude, 'the power of one's own inner ambivalence, the pull of inner contradiction' forces Merton again and again to question his purpose as a writer and a monk. 'I find more and more the power—the dangerous power—of solitude working on me', he writes at the end of 1965. If his goal, as he puts it, is to 'get rid of the last vestiges of a Pharisaical division between the sacred and the secular', Merton himself embodies the division. 'The problem', as he concludes his journal for the same year, 'is in learning to go for some time, perhaps for long periods—with no answer!!'

There are happy moments throughout Merton's journal. Some of the happiest, most liberated moments of Merton's life as monk make their way into his journal following his removal to the hermitage. Aside from the nearly ludicrous moments of invasion—Merton records one incident in which a female admirer makes her way to the hermitage and nearly compromises his chastity—and the simple pleasures of living beyond the rule—drinking Falstaff beer while reading John of Salisbury—Merton feels in the early days of his permanent removal that he has finally arrived at a place of 'silence' and of 'truth'. Writing in the late November cold of 1964, Merton senses that he has recaptured 'the lostness and wonder of the first days' when he first came to Gethsemani, 'abandoned to God with everything left behind'. It is, he feels, 'the sense of having arrived at last in the place destined for me by God'. Lying in bed late one night after a prayer vigil, Merton suddenly realizes 'that what I was, was *happy* ... And this morning, coming down, seeing the multitude of stars above the bare branches of the wood, I was suddenly hit, as it were, with the whole package of meaning of everything: that the immense

mercy of God was upon me, that the Lord in infinite kindness had looked down on me and given me this vocation out of love'.

Merton's two other great revelations—his standing on the street-corner in Louisville and his journey to Gal Vihara—both speak of a centeredness of being that needs no explanation. In *Conjectures* Merton calls it *le point vierge*, 'a point of pure nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion'. Of the Louisville experience, Merton comments, 'I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere'. In the midst of one such moment at Gal Vihara, 'All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear'. In the Zen tradition, such moments are ones of pure 'seeing' or *Satori*, what Merton himself describes in his essay 'The Inner Experience', as 'a bursting open of the inner core of the spirit to reveal the inmost self. This takes place in the peace of what we might ordinarily call contemplation, but it breaks through suddenly and by surprise'.

It is these moments of *Satori* that most impress the reader of Merton's early days at the hermitage. They flow on to the page in such torrents at times that even Merton himself is embarrassed by their power. 'Speaking perhaps unwisely, yet soberly', he admits of one such experience, 'the thing that I was left with was the most overwhelming conviction that I was called by God simply to live the rest of my life totally alone in that hollow where I would be morally and symbolically "under the bomb"'. As a scholar of William Blake, Merton himself might have thought of Los and Urizen and the dynamic tension between innocence and experience necessary for the integrated soul to enter Beulah, but it seems to me that 'negative capability' as described by Keats more accurately portrays these moments for Merton, first, because they are so brief—never more than a few days or weeks at the most—and, second, because the 'enlightenment' of such moments cannot not yield a life of unity in any tangible form. There is no doubt an 'inner unity', but it can only be described in negative terms. Keats calls it that moment 'when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'.

Merton's own definition of 'solitude' speaks of the experience in just such negative terms. It is, he writes, 'to resign oneself to not being what one knows in order to receive a totally unknown being from a totally unknown source'. This 'unknown being' is not, Merton makes clear, simply a purified version of the empirical self, but a being absolutely unknowable as an empirical phenomenon. The 'real self', Merton argues in a later passage, is not and cannot be an 'object' and he admits that in much of his writing on the subject he has betrayed the idea of such a being 'by seeming to promise a possibility of knowing it'. If, as he reflects on the doctrines of Ramana Maharshi, God is 'the ultimate "I" Who is the Self of every self', Merton recognizes that he is faced with a choice between such 'seeing' into the Self either through the traditional teachings of the church—its mysteries and its illusions—or he must invite the ambiguity at the heart of own wanderings. Speaking of the 'formal' changes just then being introduced at Gethsemani, with all of its emphasis on 'correct thinking' and clear definitions of right and wrong worship, Merton writes, 'This is simply absurd. My life makes sense only when oriented to a totally different level of consciousness: not an escape into false interiority, not a dilemma between interior and exterior, but the level of "no mind" which gives some sense to "mind" if anything can'.

The pathos of Merton's experience at the hermitage lies of course in the very fact that he is living 'under the bomb'. There can be no 'reaching after fact & reason' in the shadow of nuclear holocaust, and nothing Merton can do—spiritually or politically—can alter a world caught up in a 'demonic illusion'. Caught between the monastery and the secular world, Merton discovers he is, at best, 'non-attached, non-identified, and the hermitage ... a kind of nowhere'. Reflecting on the racism and hatred at work in the American South, he argues that 'it is the dark and terrible face of God that looks at America', but as we read so often in the Old and New Testament, the voice of God can only be heard in the world's desert places. The hermitage will be that desert. Merton takes comfort in knowing that the hollow where his hermitage is located was once occupied by slave cabins, for he considers himself 'both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner'. Both prisoners and monks share the life of the cell, but within the walls of the monastery 'The voice of God is not "heard" at every moment, and part of the "work of the cell"', for the true monastic, 'is attention so that one may not miss any sound of that voice'. Watching each morning as the SAC bomber flies overhead and listening each afternoon to the guns at Fort Knox rumbling over the hills, Merton feels that he has achieved the silence necessary to hear the voice of God speaking to 'a nation intent upon destruction ... It is necessary to be alone, to be not part of this, to be in the exile of silence, to be in a manner of speaking a political prisoner'.

The heart of Merton's thinking on his position both in the church and in the world comes in response to his reading of Rudolf Karl Bultmann, who argues, 'Real belief in God is *not a general truth* at my disposal which I can perceive and apply; on the contrary it is what it is only as something continually perceived afresh'. Merton replies in his journal, 'What does this involve? A constant crisis of belief! ... Time is given us not to *keep* a faith we once had, but to acquire a faith we need *now*'. Again, in response to the claim from Maurice Merleau-Ponty—'I am myself as I exist in the world'—Merton writes, 'how else can one be anything except by being what he is ... That is one reason for a Journal like this, to keep honestly situated'. It is clear in these and other passages that Merton deliberately invites the ambiguity that sustains so much of his truly creative thinking throughout these years. Once more, thinking of Martin Luther's critique of religious vows, Merton comments, 'Simply to enclose oneself in the "given" is no glory to God'. Both Luther and Erasmus strove to reinvigorate what they considered a lifeless, dessicated and ritualized Christianity. The question for Merton at the end of 1965 is how he can remain, unlike Luther, in unity with the church while reviving a sense of truly sacred. As a tool for Merton's spiritual and intellectual development, the journal becomes a sounding board for provoking the crisis of faith necessary to inspire the glory of a living God and so keep 'honestly situated' in himself, the church and the world.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Learning to Love* (Journals; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 382. USA \$30.00/Canada \$42.00. ISBN 0-06-065484-8 (cloth).

One afternoon in 1966, I passed Fr Louis on his way from 'the steel building' where one of the three phones connecting him to 'the outside' was located. By the primitive Trappist sign language still in use, I told him one of the brothers had