

## Reviews

---

HART, Patrick and Jonathan Montaldo (eds.), *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. xvii + 374. ISBN 0-06-231620-5 (hardback). \$28.00.

Merton's real autobiography, it has been suggested, is in his personal journals. Finding the 'real Merton', then, is a formidable task, for he edited four volumes of his journals, and HarperSanFrancisco published seven volumes of his journals in recent years. *The Intimate Merton* is a selective compilation from these seven volumes into one, with extensive cuttings and revisions.

In their desire to present Merton as favorably and faithfully as possible, the editors, who arguably know Merton as well as anybody, feel that the journals demand serious surgery. They delete anything that they judge weakens Merton's style (for example, his tendency to begin sentences with 'And'). They correct his erratic punctuation and incomplete sentences, polish his often muddled thought, and omit entire paragraphs from entries without providing elision marks. It seems to be less an autobiography than an interpretive biography strung together by greatly abridged quotes not set in context. Can we safely quote Merton from what remains? More importantly, is the 'real Merton' still there?

If the editors have been heavy-handed in reducing and sanitizing Merton, they have not provided nearly enough detail for those who have little or no acquaintance with Merton. They include sections where Merton talks about persons and events that many people know nothing about. Who, for example, is Bob (Lax)? Who is the Baroness? Either the editors should have provided a page or two of essential details at the beginning of each chapter, or, better yet, they should have just excised these passages, especially in the first few chapters. Does Merton give that East/West conference in Bangkok? Ah, yes, a few hours before his death, as we learn only from a picture caption in the middle of the book. How do the journals dovetail with his writings? The editors could have cited which books Merton wrote during the time period covered in each chapter. The introductory quotes for each chapter: were they written during the time period covered in that chapter or are they inklings of the journal themes during that period? There is a five-year gap in the journal entries between 1941 and 1946, Merton's first years as a monk, and only three entries for the next two years. Why? Didn't he write? Was he forbidden to keep a journal in those first years at Gethsemani? Or did the editors decide to skip over this important period of the Second World War for some reason?

Two days before his death Merton noted that a whole new journey was going to begin, that some of the places he really wanted to see had not yet been touched. For the reader only casually aware of Merton's life and writings, that's how the book ends too—unfinished. Could we also say that Merton's life was unfinished because he died at a relatively young age? Because I don't think so, based on this volume, I am grateful to the editors, and I think they are making a real contribution to Merton scholarship. For in spite of their decision not to include biographical and bibliographical detail, they have admirably chosen passages where Merton bares his soul and shows us his spiritual growth. They include those passages, for example, where Merton discusses Lady Wisdom and where he talks of his ambivalence about travel and his inability to find the perfect place.

Most importantly, they have astutely included all of Merton's dreams that appear in the seven volumes (around forty in all). This gives us glimpses of his intimate spiritual journey and helps us comprehend the 'real Merton', if not from the abridged journals, then at least from the unabridged accounts of his dreams. Thoreau suggested that 'dreams are the touchstones of our characters'. Perhaps we can learn about Merton's 'real self' from his dreams. No doubt Merton's dreams reminded him of situations and feelings he had been ignoring and recalled what values and relationships were most important to him. Perhaps in glancing at his dreams, we will find windows into his life and feelings, mirrors of his unexpressed emotional spirit and passion.

Merton, commenting many years later on a snapshot that had been taken when he was around 20, describes his young self as vain, selfish, and proud. In his early adult life, his 'real self' is very small, searching vaguely for something in his love affairs, his drunken bouts, even in his attempts at writing a novel. He tells us that his dreams indicate, though, that he is searching for something much deeper—the wisdom to be a saint. His search follows no straight path, however, for 'when you reread your journal you find out that your newest discovery is something you already found out five years ago'.

Explaining a dream where he is embraced by a young Jewish girl, he calls her 'Proverb' and exclaims that he loves Wisdom and seeks to make her his wife. Wisdom is a metaphor for God, striking at the depths of his heart, and he will find the feminine Wisdom Figure in the Bible most mysterious, haunting, moving, and transforming. Later in life (but several years before his relationship with M.), as he lies in a very quiet hospital, a nurse awakens him gently from a dream. He describes it as awakening for the first time from all the dreams of his life, as if the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom, is rousing him. He feels that he does not hear the soft voice of Wisdom, though she speaks everywhere and in everything. Wisdom cries out in the marketplace. All that is sweet in woman will awaken him, he comments, not for conquest and pleasure, but for the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion.

Communion with God. To be a saint. For there is only one unhappiness in life: not to love God. That is his vocation, consistent from his earliest writings. For Merton the will of God is not a 'fate' to which he submits but a creative act in his life which produces something absolutely new. Merton feels a clear call to use all his abilities to participate as long as he can in every effort to help a spiritual and cultural renewal of his time. Elaborating on Pasternak's emphasis on the sacredness of life, Merton explains that his vocation is to remain as a witness to the nobility of

life Merton's 'real self' begins to expand and spiral outward as he becomes interested in Eastern Orthodoxy. He plunges into *The Philokalia* and the writings of Evdokimov, Lossky, Bulgakov and Berdyaev [Berdyaev is misspelled as are Annapurna, Borobudur, and Gal Vihara (or is it Gil Vihara?) elsewhere]. 'Realized eschatology'—the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ now, rather than in the future, comes to the fore, thanks to the Russians. Merton confides that if it were a matter of choosing between contemplation and eschatology, there is no question that he would always be committed entirely to eschatology. Indeed, contemplation is in the service of eschatology, for it leads to the complete awakening and fulfillment of his identity and vocation of a life of compassion. As Merton explains it, 'I died of love for you, Compassion; I take you for my Lady; As Francis married poverty, I marry you.'

As Merton dreams of a colored boy who comes from very far away to be his friend, he is drawn further Eastward. Reading Gandhi forces him to recognize that he lives by half truths. He becomes aware of how much we all impede ourselves with useless spiritual baggage. While he likes his writings on solitude (as the occasion for contemplation), he rejects most of it as terrible and too negative. He acknowledges that he is a writer who has arrived. But arrived where? Void. The self has constructed an immense illusion and the guilt that goes with it. His home is elsewhere, and he turns toward the world.

Merton recognizes that he is at a turning point in his spiritual life. In the 'pivotal years' his vocation is slowly coming to the point of maturation and the resolution of doubts. He discovers Julian of Norwich, is enthralled by T.S. Eliot and R.M. Rilke, and finds that Meister Eckhart remains real when everything else is drained off. He is more and more open to other cultures and spiritualities, especially China. When he dreams about Protestants, he suggests that they are his aggressive side: he is walking into a known and definite battle. When he dreams of walking in a great city, he doesn't quite know where he is, but he feels he is moving toward the center. Progress, slowly.

He dreams a man will take him across the water on a boat for \$5 (an archetypal theme in Buddhism: taking the ferry across the water to enlightenment). He has hundreds of dollars: that is, he already has all the means necessary for enlightenment. He has to push the boat from inside to make it move, for enlightenment comes from the center of the self. Yet he decides to swim instead across the beautiful, magical water: he has to cross the water by himself. No one can do it for him. Though he can find a marvelous, wonderful life by diving into the water, Merton explains, he stays on the surface because he did not (yet) find it fitting or right for him to plunge too deeply. He never forgets that with his deepening interest in Eastern religions there is no obscuring the essential difference: personal communion with Christ at the center and heart of all reality is the source of grace and life.

Still years before M., Merton dreams that he is out of the monastery, worried about returning before dark. Hoping for a ride, he walks down the road, with his arm around a woman dressed in white. She is a stranger, yet freely intimate and loving. When she tells him never to try to kiss her or seduce her, he reassures her. They get on a bus through separate doors, but sit together. They get off the bus in the middle of the country, and when he sees a chapel, he wants to 'wake them up' in the monastery (is Merton the Bodhisattva bringing awakening to others?).

Monks are on the road, dressed as soldiers, and he tries to escape them. The woman (is this Lady Wisdom?) shields him. But that is not enough. He's in a barn, alone, and sets fire to some straw to divert pursuit (in Buddhist terms, he is using 'skillful means'). Seemingly trapped, he is suddenly out 'on the other side' in open country, with a church in the middle. Merton concludes by saying that he goes past the church when he wakes up. (Could we say that in Merton's awakening he is going beyond the church?)

Other dreams in these pivotal years give us further insight into Merton's 'real self'. At the time of his meeting with the noted Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki, he dreams of a Chinese princess who haunts him all day ('Proverb' again—he says, 'this lovely person comes in mysterious ways into my dreams'). He is overwhelmed by her freshness, youth, wonder, truth, and her 'complete reality'. A short time later he dreams of a black mother (a foster mother he loved in childhood). He embraces her with great love and much gratitude. They dance together. But then he has to continue his journey.

The journey continues, then, but Merton still fails in his search for the perfect place. His dilemma whether to travel or to stay put is an ongoing struggle. When he is 16, he travels all over Europe by himself on foot. He declares that geographic change may be needed for the spiritual action that he is seeking to be complete. He is completely shattered by the Zen Buddhist Basho's travel notes, finding them deeply moving and giving him a whole new view of his own life. On the other hand, he says, contemplation is found in faith, not in geography; you dig for it in scripture but cannot find it by crossing the sea. He asserts that he no longer has any need to travel because all the countries of the world are one under this sky. It does not much matter if you travel as long as you can be at peace where you are. Indeed, a person can voyage all over vast areas while sitting still in a room and yet soon tire of too much traveling. Merton's conflict continues right up to his final days, exploring his solitude by living at the hermitage and venturing his freedom by going on the fatal journey to Asia.

As Merton lives the last few years of his life at the hermitage at Gethsemani, his 'real self' continues to expand and his ego to diminish. What he is looking for in solitude is not happiness or fulfillment, but salvation, not his own, but the salvation of everybody. As for his writing, he feels that his better writing has been during the last ten years of his life, but he would be better off if he hadn't published a lot of it. As for all that business of filing and cataloguing manuscripts, photographs, and calligraphy (a collection of some 40,000 items) for the Merton Room at Bellarmine College: 'what a comedy'.

At the end of March 1966, in a hospital in Louisville for back surgery, he meets M., a student nurse half his age. This begins a tumultuous and unsettling period as they fall in love. For the next several months he seeks occasions where they can spend time together—picnics, lunches, walks, letters, clandestine telephone conversations. As her love arouses in him an overwhelming gratitude, he writes poems for her. Letting love take hold of him and responding to her, he says, opens up the depth of his life in ways he can not begin to understand.

This is yet another dilemma for this complex and paradoxical figure. Merton feels sexual affinity, yet must be faithful to his vows. Should he be with his newly found love, or should he live in solitude? There are feelings of amazement and gratitude, but also ambivalence, guilt, and bewilderment. He concedes that he has

to dare to love, yet bear the anxiety of self-questioning that the love arouses in him. He admits he is so in love with her that it's almost impossible to do anything but think of her. He realizes he has no business being in love and playing around with a woman, however innocently, yet he enjoys the game almost to ecstasy. The trouble is, it's not a game, as he tells us several times. The waste of his spiritual energy goes on, and even after nine months he confesses he is still held powerfully by her love.

His dreams at this time are particularly vivid, warning and signaling to him that the relationship cannot last. They are also clairvoyant, forcing him to admit and honor what his emotional involvement prevents him from recognizing: he cannot hold on to her and still be himself (his 'real self'). A few months after meeting M., he dreams he wants to date her, but she is in the hospital. He dreams that priests resent him, trying to discredit him. 'How did I get mixed up in this?' he asks. He dreams of sending a child to the hospital to tell her that he loves her. This is useless, for it would only be baby talk, pierced as he is by the arrow of the divine child Cupid.

He dreams that monks try to signal to him by semaphore, but he doesn't know how to read their warning. He makes helpless gestures about not knowing 'the rules'. There is still more ambiguity when he then dreams of walking with the abbot and his confessor, and they are friendly and open with each other. Six months into the relationship with M., he dreams of her swimming alone and disconsolate in one of Gethsemani's lakes, but he refrains from joining her for fear of the consequences. As one of the monks blocks his way of getting to her, he wakes up in distress.

While Merton admits that their mutual affection, undisguised and frank, is a much deeper love than he had experienced in his early days, he still criticizes himself for his imprudence, inconsistency, and frivolity. He blames himself for letting himself be diverted and carried along by the current of 'the world'. Still, I think that his intimacy with M. is the almost inevitable consequence of his spirituality, for three reasons. First, M. incarnates the ideal woman of his dreams (Wisdom, Proverb, the Blessed Virgin, the Chinese princess) who has inspired and transformed him for decades. M. is Wisdom crying out in the marketplace, awakening in him the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion. She is Lady Compassion that he has married. Second, in his deep involvement with Buddhism, he has learned much about contemplation and compassion. While contemplation works at eliminating all craving, all passionate attachment, and all self-seeking in the world, the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion forces him to be of use to others in the world through selfless and 'patient' love. The caring nurse M. helps him make this paradoxical transformation possible.

Third, Merton is drawn to M. by his own understanding of the nature of love. 'We discover our true selves in love', he tells us. Love is our true destiny (could we say our 'real self?'). We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone, we find it with another. Love is an intensification of life, a completeness, a wholeness of life. Persons transcend their selves in their encounters and communion with another. Love is an active force that leads persons into greater communion with the world. In sharing his love story, Merton invites us to reflect on our own stories and our own spirituality. I have no curiosity to know who M. is, but I do hope that she recognizes, with Merton, that love is indeed a transformative force and

presence, even when we are no longer in the company of the person with whom we experienced profound mutual care.

Merton has a feeling that, while 1968 will be a beast of a year, things are finally and inexorably spelling themselves out and that he is somehow on the edge of great realization. As his 'real self' expands outward to embrace the East, he is finally going to travel there. He dreams that he is drawn to the soft erotic laughter of Buddhist nuns from whom he is separated by only a paper-thin partition. The same night he dreams that the monastery at Gethsemani is on fire. Another fire dream! The fire threatens to become violent, and he wonders 'why don't they get out?' As he moves through patches of fire to safety, the building is not destroyed, but all that is inside is consumed. The fire is sacred and renewing: it destroys in order to purify and to aid the process of self-transformation. No wonder he later dreams that he is back at Gethsemani explaining to the other monks who he is—his 'real self'—dressed, not in his usual habit, but in a Buddhist monk's robe.

Having died to his 'small self', Merton's self-realization is complete. What more is there to do? The Buddha teaches that 'those who die before they die do not die when they die'. Merton has been thinking and writing about his death for several years. Half convinced he will die young, he never thinks he will turn 45; and at 45, he confesses that it matters even less if he makes it to 65. Death is a present reality for him. In writing of his approaching death three years before the event, he experiences a fullness of self, a fullness that comes from honestly and authentically facing death and accepting it without reserve.

Merton's premonitions about death also appear in a dream at the beginning of the fatal year 1968. He is suddenly caught in a flood which has cut off his way of escape—not all escape, but his way to where he wants to go. He can go back to some unfamiliar place—over the fields, the snow, upriver, possibly a bridge. A voice in the dream says 'It is not a bridge'. Merton explains that no bridge is necessary. From Zen he has learned that any life that is not lived in the face of death is meaningless.

In Merton's last recorded dream (but certainly not the last one he had), a few weeks before his death, there is an absolutely pure white mountain. (Is this the snow, upriver?) As he is dazzled by its beauty, he realizes that he is seeing the Tibetan side. He comments that his quarrel with the mountain is ended: why get mad at a mountain! There is another side of every mountain, the side that has never been photographed and turned into postcards. That is the only side worth seeing. His journey, which began with the seven storey mountain, now ends with a mountain, where everything has been turned around and inside out: this is total conversion.

Knowing his Buddha-nature from within, he is permanently transformed from within. His journey is complete: he has found his place—the still point at the center of the turning world. He has found his moment of eternity, a *temps vierge*—a new experience of time, of stillness, where he can enjoy his own presence. A time where he is no longer dominated by his ego and its demands, but is totally open to others. A moment of awe, it is the inexpressible innocence of a new dawn when the birds ask 'Is it time to be?' And as God says 'Yes', they begin to sing. As Meister Eckhart expressed it: 'blessed are the pure in heart who leave everything to God now as they did before they ever existed'. Merton pours out his nothingness to God in gratitude. That is the 'real Merton'.

Perhaps it is even more fruitless to hope to find Merton's 'real self' through studying a smattering of his dreams than by expecting to find it by reading just a seventh of his journals. Were dreams important for Merton? While he felt that it was a blessing he did not go at one point in his life to be analyzed by a psychologist, he does record them in his journal. Still, *pace* the editors who make no claim that this volume is the 'essence of' or the 'best of' Merton, I do think that they have succeeded in introducing us to the 'real' Merton, especially by their decision to include all his recorded dreams.

Merton undoubtedly is one of the most significant spiritual theologians of the twentieth century. More than that, though: he is the archetypal Everyman whose spiritual conflicts are our own, the ferryman who guides us across the waters to our own spiritual awakening. He teaches us to make sure that our path is intimately connected with our deepest love, to experience the sacred in our everyday lives and encounters, and then to gradually widen our circle of compassionate care to include all the world, none of which is alien to us.

Merton's celebration of love as a spiritual force that unites and binds all of life reveals his 'real self' and unlocks the door to ultimate reality, bringing closer that day when 'the whole world is reconciled to God in Christ'.

Leonard J. Biallas

CUNNINGHAM, Lawrence S., *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. xii + 228. ISBN 0-8028-0222-2. \$16.

Shortly after the publication in 1984 of Michael Mott's official biography of Thomas Merton I recall reading somewhere an observation by Father Timothy Kelly, then abbot of the Abbey of Gethsemani, that what still remained to be written was the story of Thomas Merton from an 'insider's' perspective. Sixteen years later, in the preface of this present volume, Father Timothy states, 'There is an adage that says, "It takes one to know one".' That, I believe is the source of the wisdom in this volume by Lawrence S. Cunningham' (p. vii). While not a professed member of a monastic community, Cunningham, a scholar of Christian spirituality and a member of the theology faculty of the University of Notre Dame, brings to his task the knowledge, experience, and sensitivity needed to grasp firmly 'the monastic vision' of Thomas Merton.

Cunningham makes it quite clear that he is not interested in rehearsing yet again the generic story of the life and works of Thomas Merton. The author states, 'My intention is to begin my study of Merton where major autobiography ends off, i.e., with his entrance into, and full embrace of, monastic life. My story begins there because of a deep personal conviction, stated in more than one place, that if one does not understand Merton as a monk, one does not understand Merton at all' (pp. 16-17). The uniqueness of this book and the significant contribution it makes to 'Merton studies' is the perspective of understanding Merton as a monk. Throughout the entire book this is the lens through which Cunningham views Thomas Merton.

This book is part of a series, 'Library of Religious Biography', which emphasizes careful scholarship without footnotes and academic jargon. As such, it is deceptively simple. There are eight chapters of almost equal length, the last being a very