

Thomas Merton

A VOW OF CONVERSATION: JOURNALS, 1964-1965

Edited with a Preface by Naomi Burton Stone
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988
xi, 212 pages -- \$17.95

Reviewed by **Anthony T. Padovano**

There are four major journals of Thomas Merton which precede *A Vow of Conversation*. *The Secular Journal* settles the question of whether he should become a monk of Gethsemani. *The Sign of Jonas* enables him to accept his vocation as a writer. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* helps him reconcile his religious calling with his role as social critic and prophet. *The Asian Journal* justifies and celebrates his turning to the East.

A Vow of Conversation brings Thomas Merton into the hermitage. It is an inward journey into the psyche and soul of one of America's most celebrated personalities. The psychological climax of this journal occurs on 20 August 1965 when Thomas Merton formally leaves the daily life of the monastery to take up residence in a hermitage. The unifying theme in this journal is the nature and quality of experience.

Until this journal, Merton steered a perilous course between the authenticity of his own life and the responsibilities he believed he owed to others. It would, of course, be foolish to suppose that anyone of us is or ought to be set free from this tension and dilemma. By the time Merton reaches *A Vow of Conversation*, however, he has affirmed his vocation as a person and as a monk in three ways which would have been unthinkable to him at the beginning of his monastic journey. He has become not only well known but, perhaps, better known, as a writer, a social justice catalyst and an advocate of Buddhism. All of these callings were grounded, as we know, in his monastic and mystic vocation.

The Merton of this journal (1964-1965) senses a need to settle some mighty unfinished business with himself. He needs to test and purify the character and quality of his personal experience. Where has all of this change and movement brought him?

The other journals to which I have referred seem more concerned with balancing the personal experience of Merton with the criticism, the demands, the traditions of an alternative way of being a monk, a way which is conventional and ecclesiastically supported. This journal, however, explores the value of personal experience as something meaningful in itself, without reference to someone else's system or even to conceptual categories of "meaningfulness." Merton asks himself in his entry of 5 March 1965 whether the need to make experience meaningful, a Western obsession, renders it "unreal or less real." Does this reduce us constantly to living "outside of experience" as though the "outside" is the fullness of that experience. "This is one of the basic ambiguities of Western thought," Merton observes.

This insight is profound and perilous. It is profound because it brings us to the very essence of authenticity and personalism, of integrity and self-consciousness. Karl Rahner once noted that, too often, we respond to reality and to the Church not with the mind and heart we have but with the mind and heart we believe we are supposed to have. The insight is perilous because it can lead easily to self-indulgence, eccentricity and narcissism. And, yet, unless this question is posed and its reality dealt with, there is no substantive encounter with our souls.

I believe that the energy and tranquillity of this journal move around this central theme of the character and quality of our personal experience. Had Merton avoided this issue he would never have become a hermit. Once the issue is joined, he seems able to criticize the monastery and the Church and himself more radically than he has done in his other journals.

At the heart of Merton's rejection of his Abbot's view of the world and of the monastic life is the need to defend the integrity of what he has experienced in almost twenty-five years as a monk. The criticisms of Dom James Fox are never more pointed, more personal, even petty, than they are in this journal. Beneath them, however, is not petulance only but an awareness that to be a monk and a person on someone else's model is to become a false, empirical, institutional, inauthentic self.

And, so, Merton asks himself, not about the value of renunciation but about what that renunciation is for and who is defining its parameters (3 March 1964). He questions obedience when obedience is to little more than a collective will to power, monastic or ecclesial (19 March 1964). He is impressed with the insight of Paul's *Letter to the Romans* that "God will always be true even though everyone is false" (3, 3-4). Merton has come to

appreciate his own experience of the monastery and of God, with far less need to justify them in traditional categories. His critique of the Church, therefore, becomes more intense. He writes on 30 June 1964:

The mystique of infallibility joined with conservatism and power politics may lead to a colossal crisis of order and obedience throughout the whole Church. When will it really break?

He adds:

How badly we need a real spirit of liberty in the Church! . . . There is an appalling scandal in the way in which the whole idea of the Church's authority is undermined by Church politicians. This even raises (once again) serious questions about my own vocation.

Merton is attracted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's observation that Christian instinct draws him to religionless rather than to religious people (9 August 1964). He is intrigued by John Henry Newman and by all he had to suffer from fools in the Church and in the hierarchy (30 May 1965). Merton's critique of others is balanced by his critique of himself. The motive force behind this, I believe, is a need to affirm his own experience.

He writes with a candor about his personal life which is even more direct than it is in his earlier works. As his fiftieth birthday draws near, he regrets "my lack of love, my selfishness, my glibness, which covered a profound shyness and an urgent need for love. My glibness with girls who after all did love me . . . my fault was in my inability to believe it" (30 January 1965). The next year Merton fell in love with a young nurse he met in the hospital. He writes on 26 June 1965 in words which describe, I suggest, not only the past but the future, the way he would have felt, had he lived, after the separation from the nurse:

I was left the other day with a sort of Burnt Norton feeling about the part of the garden I never went to. A feeling that if I had taken another turn in the road, I might have ended up married . . . because of this, there remains an incompleteness in me that cannot be remedied.

Merton goes on to describe his inability to come to terms with women properly. He had hoped that this journal would be published even though he predicted, wrongly, that there was enough "in this Journal to destroy me forever after I am dead" (5 July 1965).

I remain enormously impressed with Merton's willingness to allow all false images of himself to be dispelled as he seeks desperately to encounter the experience of his own self and his unique relationship with God. In this last entry, Merton gives us a symbol, a poetic insight into his soul:

Last evening, when the moon was rising, I saw the warm burning soft red of a doe in the field . . . and then I saw a second doe The thing that struck me most — when you look at them directly and in movement, you see what the primitive cave painters saw. Something you never see in a photograph. It is most awe-inspiring The deer reveals to me something essential, not only in itself, but also in myself . . . something profound. The face of that which is both in the deer and in myself . . . I could sense the softness of their brown coat and longed to touch them.

Here, at the end, Merton finds not only God but also himself, in an experience that did not need to be justified by Church or Abbot, by cognitive orthodoxy or credal rectitude. At the end, he is the hermit and monk, the contemplative and self-defined person he always longed to be.

Robert Imperato

MERTON AND WALSH ON THE PERSON

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vii, 174 pages -- \$14.95

Reviewed by **William H. Shannon**

I don't quite know what to make of this book! From the book's cover and its bland unattractiveness, through the author's stern reprimand to Merton scholars for having uniformly ignored Daniel Walsh's influence on Merton's understanding of the "person" and on to his not always successful effort to hitch Merton's notion of "person" to Walsh's, I found myself bewildered by so many things.

One of them was the lack of clarity in the book. To take but one example: on page 4, in criticism of those who claimed that Merton got his notions of "person" and "individual" from Maritain, the author admits Merton's indebtedness to the French philosopher, but insists: "*Merton goes beyond* the philosophical distinctions of Maritain." I would certainly be prepared to say *amen* to that. Four pages later, the author, whose intent is to show Merton's indebtedness to Daniel Walsh for his understanding of "person" and "individual," states nonetheless: "*Merton moves beyond*