

HUDSON, Robert, *The Monk's Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966*, Foreword by David Dalton (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), pp. xiv + 249. ISBN 978-0-8028-7520-4 (cloth) \$23.00.

In the Preface to *Mad World: Evelyn Waugh and the Secrets of Brideshead*, her detailed account of the biographical background of Waugh's 1945 novel *Brideshead Revisited*, Paula Byrne notes the current trend away from "the heavily footnoted biographical doorstopper" toward "more flexible and more selective" studies of particular events or pivotal periods that offer key insights into the lives and characters of their subjects.¹ As its subtitle indicates, Robert Hudson's "intentionally selective . . . parallel biography" (7) (in which, as it happens, both Waugh and his most celebrated novel make brief but significant appearances) exemplifies this turn to what might be called "micro-biography," focusing on the crucial months when Thomas Merton's monastic vocation and dedication to contemplative solitude are most severely tested by the emotional, psychological and spiritual upheaval consequent upon falling in love with a student nurse half his age following back surgery in March 1966. This relationship would absorb the monk's thoughts and feelings throughout the coming months until he eventually resolved, after the romance was discovered by his superiors, to recommit himself to life as a hermit begun the year before.

This same period was marked by Merton's enthusiastic discovery of the music of Bob Dylan, who was then dealing with the fallout from his own iconoclastic transformation during the previous year from acoustic folk-protest troubadour to electrified folk-rock innovator, and who would withdraw into a kind of solitude of his own following his mysterious motorcycle accident on July 28, 1966, the same day Merton was writing a Dylan-influenced love poem. *The Monk's Record Player* provides both a detailed investigation of Merton's engagement with Dylan's music in the latter half of 1966 and a suggestive double portrait of these 1960s "cultural icons" (3), whose lives on the surface were radically different but who "both were unflagging spiritual pilgrims, perpetually restless, intense, and curious" (5). Hudson presents an intriguing case for the proposition that the twenty-five-year-old singer-composer and the fifty-one-year-old author, social critic and contemplative were each in their own way prophetic figures – citing Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'" (1) – and that while "they lived their lives a thousand miles apart, their

1. Paula Byrne, *Mad World: Evelyn Waugh and the Secrets of Brideshead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010) ix.

souls were next-door neighbors” (3).

Though Hudson describes his book as a dual biography, the major focus is clearly on Merton. Since there is no specific evidence that Dylan was familiar with Merton and his work (though Hudson suggests some possible clues that he was), the connection is all from Merton’s side. Only twenty-six of the text’s 196 pages focus directly on Dylan: three “Interludes” distributed through the three sections into which the book is divided. In fact Merton’s own first mention of Dylan, in a journal entry from June 14, 1966 (the same day that he decides to “own up and face” the abbot about his “affair”), does not occur until page 99, almost exactly half-way through the book, so there is a good deal of context that precedes the initial contact.

Following the Introduction (1-8) setting forth Hudson’s reasons for considering these two figures in tandem, and a brief Prologue (9-11) situating Merton on his hermitage porch on March, 6, 1966, entranced by the sight of deer in the nearby field, a moment of peace preceding the disruption of his solitary life before the end of that same month, Part I, entitled “Utopian Hermit Monk” (13-61) (a phrase taken, like those for the following sections, from a Dylan song) surveys the major events of the nearly quarter-century of Merton’s monastic life: his entry to Gethsemani on December 10, 1941; the publication of his best-selling 1948 autobiography and subsequent volumes of prose and poetry that enhanced his reputation as a spiritual writer of rare insight; his continuing quest for greater solitude; his decade of mentoring new arrivals to the abbey as master of novices; the “epiphany” in downtown Louisville in 1958 that brought a deepened identification with the needs and struggles of people beyond the monastic walls and a heightened awareness of and response to social and political challenges of peace and poverty and racial justice; and the process that finally led to his taking up full-time residence in the cinder-block cabin on a hill overlooking the abbey in August 1965. These four chapters are followed by a briefer summary of the same period in the life of Robert Zimmerman (52-61), from his birth on May 24, 1941, a little more than six months before Merton entered Gethsemani, through his early experiences, musical and otherwise, in Minnesota, to his arrival in New York City as a twenty-year-old now calling himself Bob Dylan, and his emergence over the next five years as the most charismatic and controversial figure in the early 1960s folk revival.

Part II, aptly titled “She Speaks like Silence” (63-117), returns Merton to the hermitage porch on March 6 and then moves forward through the tumultuous events of the next five months: the cervical fusion surgery on March 25 to treat the pain and numbness caused by degeneration of

a spinal disc; the first encounter with the student nurse five days later, their immediate attraction to each other, the clandestine phone calls and meetings, the poetry and prose reflections written to and for her, the inevitable discovery of the relationship, the tensions and ambivalences as well as the moments of ecstatic wonder and joy they experienced, and the eventual acceptance of the fact that they would have to let one another go their separate ways. In the midst of all this comes Merton's discovery of Dylan and his music, which Hudson calls "a valuable distraction, if not an outright obsession" (105). These same months in Dylan's own life, surveyed in the second Interlude, "I Do Believe I've Had Enough" (111-17), were occupied with tours in Australia and Europe at a frantic pace that could not be sustained and that came to an abrupt halt in the motorcycle accident that may or may not have been serious but that in either case led to what the author calls "Bob Dylan's own search for solitude" (117).

The final, most original and most significant section, entitled "The Lonesome Sparrow Sings" (119-91), chronicles the aftermath of the romance in the fall and winter of 1966, the continuing influence of Dylan, particularly on Merton's experimental poetic sequence *Cables to the Ace*, largely written in September and October while he was repeatedly listening to a new batch of Dylan records (played on the borrowed abbey phonograph that gives the book its title), the gradual waning of this enthusiasm in subsequent months. The third interlude (168-76), which precedes the final chapter's survey of Merton's two remaining years in the hermitage, and the Asian pilgrimage that ends in the tragedy of his death at a monastic conference in Thailand, takes Dylan through the end of the decade, focusing particularly on the mid-1967 recording sessions that produced the legendary, long unreleased "Basement Tapes," made with the band that became "The Band," and the paradoxical polarities of the solitary and the social, perpetual pilgrimage and yearning for roots, that marked the lives of both these creative iconoclasts.

This fascinating narrative has many virtues, but unfortunately consistency in details is not one of them. The problem is visible on the very first page: while Pope Francis in his 2015 address to Congress did indeed call Merton, along with Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day, one of "Four great Americans,"² he certainly did not say they were figures "who most shaped his thought and faith" (1). The author seems to have only the most hazy acquaintance with the basic structure of monastic life. He writes of Merton that in 1947 "he was living as a novice under solemn vows. In the usual order of things, a postulant enters the monastery

2. See Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 17.

under what are called ‘simple vows,’ a testing period and time of discernment. After five or six years, if the postulant proves worthy and capable of enduring the rigors of monastic life, the order invites him to become a novice under ‘solemn vows’ (26). This is of course far from “the usual order of things”: postulancy lasts only a matter of weeks – Merton became a postulant on December 13, 1941, three days after arriving at the Abbey of Gethsemani, and entered the novitiate a little more than two months later, on February 21, 1942; the Trappist novitiate lasted two years, culminating in the profession of simple vows (Merton, by exception, actually made his first vows privately after completing the canonical year of novitiate required by Church law³); living under simple vows for at least three years, during which time he was free to leave at the conclusion of each annual cycle, the monk then was eligible to make final, solemn vows, a lifelong commitment to the monastic life, as Merton did on March 19, 1947. The description of the *horarium*, the daily monastic schedule, is almost equally misconstrued. Relying on the summary provided in the second volume of Merton’s journals, the author begins his overview of the monk’s day: “You rise at two in the morning. Before your first meal – four hours from now – you go to the chapel to chant Matins and Lauds and to hear a homily. After spending time in meditation, you chant the Night Office, pray, chant Prime, and attend a general meeting of the community” (15). Not realizing that the initial reference in his source is to matins and lauds of the Little Office of Our Lady, an additional liturgical service eventually phased out in the mid-1950s, rather than to the canonical office, he seems to be distinguishing the night office from matins and lauds, when in fact it consists precisely of canonical matins and lauds (or vigils and matins, in the usual Cistercian terminology); there is no homily at this point, though the nocturns of vigils include readings from sermons and other writings of patristic authors; he makes no mention of the private masses said by monastic priests, at which the rest of the community receives communion rather than fasting until the conventual Mass celebrated later in the morning; no notice is taken of mixt, the somewhat more substantial early morning meal taken on days when the monks are not fasting; of the so-called “little hours” only none, not terce and sext, is explicitly included, an afternoon Mass is erroneously inserted in the schedule, no attention is given to the substantial supper eaten after work in summer or the lighter collation taken in the winter season when there is no fast (he simply says, “You have no supper”) and the final offices of vespers and compline are mentioned only in general terms, not by name.

3. See Thomas Merton, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 6, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012) xlviii.

Even the chronology of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is fuzzy, as 1962 is given as the date when “the English Mass was replacing the Latin after Vatican II” (101).

This lack of knowledge of monastic and ecclesial basics does not inspire confidence in the author’s reliability, and the frequency of errors in biographical and historical details reinforces this unease. Merton’s younger brother is repeatedly referred to as Paul (14, 18, 23): unlike Capt. J. P. Jones, John Paul Merton was never called by his middle name. Merton spent only a single year at Cambridge University (1933-34) not two years (14, 18). He did not apply for American citizenship “a decade before his death” (18) but became a US citizen in 1951. Merton heard Catherine de Hueck (not yet Doherty) speak at St. Bonaventure College (not yet University) in the summer of 1941, not the fall (20), which would have been too late for him to volunteer at Friendship House in Harlem in August of that year. He had already decided to enter the Trappists before Pearl Harbor, and had written to them that he planned to come on December 18 when the semester ended – he merely moved his departure up a week in the wake of the American entry into the war, rather than simply leaving for Kentucky as a consequence of the attack, as though this were the precipitating factor (21). The trip was made by train, not by bus (21), except from Louisville to Bardstown. While Gethsemani produced cheese for community use and local sale during the abbacy of Dom Frederic Dunne (23), there were no fruitcakes made or sold until the mail-order business began under Dom James Fox and Brother Frederic Collins in the mid-1950s (and fudge came even later). Merton’s agent Naomi Burton (not yet Stone) was not “a college friend” (24) – this was Virginia (Jinny) Burton, no relation. He had not published two books of poetry and two “religious biographies” before the appearance of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (25), but three volumes of verse (*Figures for an Apocalypse* [1947] as well as *Thirty Poems* [1944] and *A Man in the Divided Sea* [1946]) and only one biography, *Exile Ends in Glory*, which had just come out shortly before the autobiography (the second, *What Are These Wounds?* was already written but not published until 1950). Bernard Fox, the brother of Gethsemani’s abbot, lived at the monastery but was not a monk (71). Merton was 50, not 51, when he became a full-time hermit in August 1965 (50). Roger LaPorte did not burn himself to death in front of the United Nations during a Catholic Peace Fellowship demonstration (93) but in a solitary pre-dawn action. Merton did not refer to the student nurse with whom he fell in love by her initial in his journal (86); the editor of volume 6 substituted “M.” to respect her privacy, a custom followed by most Merton scholars, though not in the present volume.

Merton's commentary on Camus' *The Plague* was not written for a new edition of the novel (163, 166) but as part of a series of pamphlet commentaries on Religious Dimensions in Literature. Dom James' hermitage was not in a cabin "[a]nother monk had found [for] him" (164) but in a new structure designed by the cellarer, Brother Clement Dorsey, who had worked with Frank Lloyd Wright before entering the monastery. Far from being written in free verse (165-66), "Responsory (1948)," one of the first three Merton poems set to music by John Jacob Niles, is a rare example of rhyme in Merton's verse, eight quatrains patterned x-a-y-a, with a regular refrain in the first, fourth and eighth stanzas. The four issues of Merton's "little magazine" *Monks Pond* were not all issued in the first half of 1968 (179); the third issue came out at the very end of August and work on the final one was not completed before Merton left on his final trip in mid-September – he never saw a copy.

While this disconcerting pattern of (generally minor) inaccuracies detracts to some extent from the overall success of the book, by no means does it simply cancel it out. Although not disappearing entirely, the errata diminish significantly as Hudson moves into the heart of his story. His careful, well-organized, comprehensive account of Merton's response to Dylan and his music makes a substantial contribution both to Merton studies and more generally to the cultural history of a pivotal period in twentieth-century American life. He provides a brief but informative profile of Chrysogonus Waddell, the conservatory-trained musician who became the abbey choirmaster and prolific liturgical composer (whose lovely hymn "Rosa Mystica" was recently featured in the concluding scene of the film *Lady Bird*) and introduced Merton to the music not only of Dylan but of Joan Baez, whose rendition of "Silver Dagger" became for Merton and M. the song most expressive of their feelings for each other. He sets out the successive stages of Merton's deepening appreciation of Dylan, from the initial encounter with *Highway 61 Revisited* (the title of which Hudson considers, somewhat implausibly, to be an allusion to that of Waugh's 1945 novel [102]), which Fr. Chrysogonus had purchased for the abbey, through the earlier albums requested from and provided by Merton's friend Ed Rice, along with the more recent *Blonde on Blonde* (the title of which Hudson suggests plays on the notoriety of the so-called "black-on-black" paintings of Merton's close friend the abstract artist Ad Reinhardt [133], a more likely connection than that with Waugh). (Not mentioned is the fact that Merton evidently never listened to *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, his breakthrough second album that contained such protest songs as "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Masters of War" that would presumably have had a particular appeal for Merton.) He makes a strong

case for Merton's poem "Cancer Blues" being directly inspired by Dylan's song "From a Buick 6" (123-24), and a somewhat less convincing one for Dylan's songs, and particularly the surrealistic free verse of some of his album liner notes, as the major influence on *Cables to the Ace*,⁴ written largely in the fall of 1966 when Merton was most "deeply involved" in Dylan's work (136) – while Merton himself refers to the sequence as "a bit Dylan-like in spots," a statement in which Hudson finds "more than a hint of understatement" (142), and the language no doubt does owe a considerable debt to Dylan that has previously gone largely unrecognized, Merton's strategy of exploiting the abuse of language by parodying the meaningless cacophony of contemporary pseudo-communication, in order to clear the way for a movement into the silence and emptiness of communion beyond words, seems significantly different in intent and result from Dylan's linguistic experimentation.

Events familiar to many Merton readers take on new resonances in the context of Hudson's overall presentation: the incongruous scene of Merton playing Dylan at high volume during the October 1966 visit of his octogenarian friend the philosopher Jacques Maritain to support his identification of the singer as a new François Villon; the visit of Joan Baez in December and her expression of disillusionment with what she considered the violence in some of Dylan's more recent lyrics, a judgment Merton initially rejected but one that may have eventually led him to abandon his projected article on Dylan for Ed Rice's magazine *Jubilee*, because, as he wrote to Baez a couple months later, "I lack perspective" (158), perhaps an implicit acknowledgment that she was in a better position to evaluate her one-time lover's current attitudes and commitments. Widening the scope from Dylan in the closing chapters, Hudson incorporates information on the cycle of Merton poems set to music by the influential, and eccentric, collector and composer of folk songs John Jacob Niles, whose settings rather surprisingly did not employ the folk idiom but became "what are called 'art songs,' with complex, nuanced, somewhat meandering melodies meant to be sung by trained voices" (165); a somewhat similar process transformed four of Merton's eight "freedom songs" into an orchestral work by composer Alexander Peloquin, which premiered at a liturgical conference in May 1968 as a tribute to the martyred Martin Luther King, sung by the choir of King's own Ebenezer Baptist Church (184-85). Perhaps the most telling incident signaling the conclusion of Merton's intense absorption in Dylan's music paradoxically comes with his first actual purchase of a Dylan album, the newly released *John Wesley Harding*, at the end of January 1968; though he calls it "his best" and

4. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

“Very encouraging” (180) he has little more to say about it, and is clearly more fascinated, as Hudson notes, with his other purchase on the same day, John Coltrane’s *Ascension*, a revolutionary jazz recording that he described as “shattering. A fantastic and prophetic piece of music” (180), a sign of renewed interest in the musical genre that had most captivated him in the years immediately before entering the monastery. Had his own life not been cut tragically short he may well have continued to follow Dylan’s various reinventions of himself and his music, but at least as of 1968 this phase of his encounter with popular culture had come, if not to a definitive conclusion, to what turned out to be a permanent pause.

In his closing Acknowledgements, Hudson thanks his wife for the suggestion “that what started as a breezy article might be turned into a serious book” (197). One might wonder if, given Hudson’s relative lack of familiarity with other aspects of Merton’s life, his research on Merton and Dylan would have been better presented in an article, breezy or otherwise, rather than in a full-scale book. Despite its numerous incidental flaws, the book was the right choice. The broader scope afforded by its greater length allows the author to situate Merton’s encounter with Dylan in the context of the overall arc of each of their lives and of their times. Not only is Dylan’s importance to Merton made clear, but seeing Dylan through Merton’s eyes provides an intriguing and enlightening perspective on Dylan himself as well, as fellow prophet and fellow pilgrim. As Hudson suggests in his brief Epilogue (192-96), these two figures are most vividly present in “our cultural mind’s eye” in that brief period, “that critical, chaotic time,” when their respective journeys came closest to convergence. “‘Bringing it all back home’ meant something different to each of them. But it is to our benefit that these two men, artists of very different kinds, had enough vision to seek out that ideal home in the first place and, when they grew disenchanted with it, enough wisdom to keep on looking” (195). Hudson’s engaging and enjoyable account makes it possible for the reader to accompany these inspired, and inspiring, seekers on this common quest.

Patrick F. O’Connell

ORBERSON, David E. *Thomas Merton: Evil and Why We Suffer – From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), pp. xiv + 127. ISBN 978-1-5326-3899-2 (paper) \$19.00.

Scholars continue to assess the influence of non-Christian religious traditions on Thomas Merton’s life and thought. Inter-monastic and inter-religious dialogue were significant features in many of Merton’s later