

him to his worldly past lest they become obstacles to his calling to the Trappist life and ideals. Yet even admitting the great loss that would have meant for us *and the Church*, there remains that haunting image of that young aspirant at the gate. The multitude of biographies and scholarly studies notwithstanding, we will never know for sure what, in retrospect, he might have preferred for himself. All we can say with any measure of confidence is that in the end his restless heart found its rest where he always knew it would be, in God's grace and enduring peace.

Peter Kountz

**THOMAS MERTON AS WRITER AND MONK
A CULTURAL STUDY - 1915-1951**

Brooklyn, New York: Carlton Publishing Company Inc., 1991
vii, 208 pages/no price listed/hard cover

Reviewed by Richard Weber, O.C.S.O.

To what extent Thomas Merton sat down and deliberately and consciously engineered the *causa sui* project of his own immortality has yet to be fully investigated. In the past two decades however, scores of studies have appeared, all dealing with some aspect of the Merton corpus. That Merton chose religion as the vehicle for his vast literary project is most significant. Other options were open: history, literature, psychology, etc., but it is becoming more and more evident that religion and all its accoutrements was best suited to the Merton temperament, and writing the best vehicle of its expression.

Merton, early on, manufactured a huge dilemma about being both a writer and a monk. At the same time and in the same monastery another monk wrote and published, had best-sellers, etc., and didn't give it a second thought. Why Merton made such a bugaboo about everything is perhaps the point. Peter Kountz tries to throw some light on this subject.

To this end Kountz limits himself to the first thirty-six years of Merton's life—that is twenty-six years outside the monastery, and the first ten years inside. It is the twenty-six formative years "in the world" that made Merton a writer, the ten years inside the monastery, a particular kind.

This volume, No. 11 in the *Chicago Studies in the History of American Religion* series, is actually the doctoral dissertation of the author, written at an early point in Merton scholarship (1975). (The title page of a copy of the dissertation catalogued in the Gethsemani Abbey library bears the date March, 1976.) The work bears the subtitle *A Cultural Study, 1915-1951*, and is divided into three sections: 1) The Evolution of a Writer: January 1915-September 1936; 2) The Evolution of a Monk: November 1936-December 1941; and 3) The Fusion of Writer and Monk: The Early Monastic Years.

Kountz's main contention, and one now widely accepted in Merton scholarship is that Merton was a writer who became a monk. Merton's life as a monk undoubtedly made him a certain kind of writer, but he was a "word-fellow" from the outset. Thus Kountz's first section documents Merton's life and intellectual formation from his birth until 1936. Kountz fleshes out the early family years and much of Merton's reading, travel and study. *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *My Argument with the Gestapo*, both autobiographical, are used extensively in this section. True, both these works were to be written later, but their seeds were sown in these years.

In section two, treating Merton's evolution as a monk, Kountz focuses on the events and issues that point toward a monastic vocation. A great deal of writing accumulates in these years. These pre-monastic years are a period of intense study, furious activity, voracious reading, and of course, writing. But most importantly, these were the years of Merton's conversion process and vocational development, an evolution that would lead, ultimately, to the monastery at Gethsemani. These were the years of Merton's Journey to Catholicism and to the "way of silence." Vastly influential during this evolutionary period were the books Merton read and the persons who influenced his life's direction. Kountz amply fills out this period of development, using again *The Seven Storey Mountain* as his main source. During this time too, Merton was testing not only his vocation as a monk, but his talents as a writer.

Kountz is no doubt correct in his intuition that in this evolutionary period the question of Merton's quest for his Catholic, priestly, and monastic identity held more importance for him than his career as a writer. Having written his master's thesis on Nature and Art in William Blake, and taken a teaching job at St. Bonaventure's, Merton's top priority was the inner direction of his life. The trusty journal, a literary form Merton would utilize brilliantly all his life, records the stations on the way, at this particular point of his journey. *The Secular Journal*, a selection of journal entries covering

the period from October 1, 1939, to November 27, 1941 records his growing awareness of God's presence in the world and his own life. Many of the attitudes and aspirations that would engage him during his twenty-six years in the monastery are already present in germ form in that journal. During these pre-monastic years Merton was already wrestling with the problem of reconciling his faith and his literary, ambitions, a struggle that would haunt him in one way or other all his life.

In the third section, *The Fusion of Writer and Monk: The Early Monastic Years*, Kountz attempts to bring Merton's dual vocation together. Kountz successfully charts the quest of the "two Mertons", and the variety of issues involved. This section is worth careful study for the light it throws on the continual conflict between the two Merton personae. Kountz goes over the vast material with a finetooth-comb, evidencing sympathy and understanding and admiration at every turn. Kountz's Merton ends up being a mystic, writer-monk, a man of charity. "Thus we have Merton's understanding of the unique relationship of the man of letters with the man of God, of the writer with the monk. And yet, Merton's singularity was not only his ability to resolve the conflict between the two vocations and to achieve a reconciliation, but also his ability to write about the experience and the outcome" (p. 180).

Precisely! But to what extent the whole issue was a matter of rhetoric, cleverly conceived and vastly orchestrated to suit his own *causa sui* project what another Merton scholar has termed Merton's "art of denial", [David Cooper] is yet to be fully and satisfactorily investigated. Yet, the Kountz study is an essential and helpful guide in this direction, and one must be grateful for the ground work provided here.

One of the best features of the volume is the author's Introduction. In a dozen perceptive pages Kountz provides an overview and update of the Merton achievement. This is an attempt to assess the later Merton corpus and more recent studies about him. It is unfortunate that this section was not expanded, as Kountz manifests uncannily analytical talent in what is given. Of course, enough material exists for an entire volume on the topic, but a few particularly helpful studies have been overlooked, curiously, in the area of Kountz's competence. The first is *Thomas Merton: Monk And Artist* by Victor A. Kramer. Much of Kramer's work complements and extends Kountz's thesis. Two studies in a similar vein, one by Ross Labrie, and the other by Thérèse Lentfoehr are not listed. Also, while listing biographical studies of Merton, Kountz mysteriously omits M. Basil

Pennington's *Thomas Merton Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom*, the only full scale biography from a monastic perspective.

It is precisely, in this area of monastic perspective that I found Kountz's contention that in John Howard Griffin's published writings on Thomas Merton "we have the most compelling account yet produced..." of Merton's story. It is from "the monastic sensibility" that Merton worked and which Griffin seemed to grasp so well, says Kountz. This insight is appealing and one hopes that Kountz might expand upon it in future study.

The volume contains an editor's preface by the dean of American religious studies, Martin E. Marty. Listed too are the other twenty-two volumes in the Series. The book provides notes on the chapters, an incomplete bibliography of primary and secondary sources, and an index.

Ralph Eugene Meatyard
**FATHER LOUIE:
 PHOTOGRAPHS OF THOMAS MERTON**
 New York: Timken Publishers, 1991
 108 pages - \$20.00

Reviewed by Deba P. Patnaik

This is not the usual kind of portrait-photography book. It contains fifty Merton portraits by Meatyard, two Meatyard images by Merton, eleven pages of mutual correspondence, a two-page Meatyard Eulogy plus a four-page reminiscence about Merton, two pages of Barry Magid's Preface, a ten-page Note on the photographer by his son, Christopher, and 14 pages of Guy Davenport's essay, "Tom and Gene." Neither Thomas Merton nor Ralph Eugene Meatyard was an ordinary individual.

Meatyard and Merton were instantly drawn to each other the first time they met at the Abbey of Gethsemani in January 1951. The same year, Merton wrote Ed Rice about Meatyard as "this marvelous photographer friend."¹ In his "*Restricted Journals*," he commends the artist's work—"marvelous, arresting, visionary things. Most

1. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, (NY: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), p. 292. Hereafter referred to in the text as *RJ*.