

Reviews

Thomas Merton. *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*. Selected and edited with introduction by William H. Shannon. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994. xii + 352 pages. \$25.00.

Reviewed by Douglas Burton-Christie

In 1965 as Thomas Merton was preparing to enter his hermitage on a more permanent basis, he addressed the Gethsemani community on the theme "A Life Free From Care." He spoke of his hopes for realizing within himself a genuine "transparency"—a freedom from the constraints borne of convention and fear—through which the radiant light of Christ might shine. As this fifth and final volume of Thomas Merton's letters shows, this longing freedom was neither a casual nor occasional occupation for Merton, but a passionate, life-long pursuit.

The editor William Shannon describes three stages in Merton's developing sense of freedom, each of which finds expression in this volume. During the first half of Merton's life, it meant largely the "removal of restraints that prevented him from doing what he wanted to do." The second stage in his journey to freedom began, according to Shannon, when Merton arrived at Gethsemani in 1941. This period was characterized by the monk's *outward focus*—he looked to the monastic rule and to the decisions of his superiors as a "mediated way of exercising freedom." The third stage was marked by Merton's growing sense of freedom as an "inner reality, guided much more from within than without." Realizing this kind of freedom included both struggling to rid his life of the fictions and illusions we so often live

by and uncovering his true identity. And it necessarily involved him in prophetic witness.

This growth in freedom did not come easily or without a cost. One of the unfortunate things about the way Merton's story is often told is that one is left with no real sense of *how* he managed to undergo such radical change from the earlier to the later part of his life, no sense of what he had to struggle through to reach the admirable transparency of his last years. His rough edges are softened; his neurotic and compulsive tendencies are obscured; the immense *uncertainty* that plagued him at crucial moments of his life is ignored. This is perhaps a natural tendency of the "canonization" process, official or unofficial. It is, however, unfortunate. For in the process, we lose the sense of what it involved for Merton to enter into the crucible—of his own life and the times in which he lived—and emerge on the other side, bruised, scarred but also purified, free. We should be thankful for these letters, for they reveal Merton's journey toward freedom in all its particularity and help us see how much it cost him personally to arrive at the profound integration of his later life. They also remind us how willingly he entered into the struggles of others who were striving to realize freedom in their own lives.

A brief word about the content and organization of this volume: it is organized under four major headings—Art and Freedom, War and Freedom, Merton's Life and Works, and Religious Thought and Dialogue. These are broad categories that attempt, with only partial success, to give order to the letters within. This is probably the most varied and least thematically coherent collection of letters in the series, and it is difficult to imagine how it could have been organized any differently. Still, the reader should recognize that this final volume presents particular challenges: one is compelled to travel back and forth across significant stretches of time, and read letters that are grouped in a variety of ways—by chronology, by correspondent, by theme. This volume in a sense catches up all the loose ends of Merton's correspondence.

There is something positive to be said about this profusion of letters on every conceivable topic: one sees clearly just how capacious Merton's interests were and how much effort he was willing to expend to cultivate friendships or answer simple queries concerning shared interests. There is a wonderful set of letters to Victor Hammer on art and spirituality; one senses from the tone of the letters that

friendship and contact with this sensitive artist meant a great deal to Merton. There is a letter to Rachel Carson, the great environmental visionary, testifying to Merton's early grasp of the importance of this issue. There is a set of letters to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's literary agent, that spans twenty years and that provides new insight into an important friendship and into the often tortured relationship Merton had with his writing. He addresses a moving series of letters to Evora Arca de Sardinia, whose husband was a victim of the Bay of Pigs invasion. He writes to religious men and women caught in the changes wrought by Vatican II and wondering what sense they might yet make out of religious life. He addresses the American bishops, urging them to take a strong stand on Schema XIII at the Second Vatican Council. There are letters to Louis Massignon and Herbert Mason on Islam (that complement those to Abdul Aziz and others found in *The Hidden Ground of Love*) that reveal Merton's clear intuitive grasp of the spiritual wisdom of Islam. There is a fierce, impassioned correspondence with Leslie Dewart on the Cold War in general and the Bay of Pigs in particular. He also answers queries on "the meaning of life," on his "formula for success," on "books that have influenced him," on "how a Catholic writer can have the greatest possible influence on his public."

Here is Merton in full sail, responding enthusiastically to the myriad questions of his correspondents, stretching himself to encompass their concerns. Three themes pertaining directly to freedom warrant a closer examination, and I will devote the remainder of the review to these: Merton's "vocation crisis," war and freedom, and what I refer to as the movement toward "freedom of spirit."

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There is an interesting and revealing selection of letters in this volume that Shannon has placed under the heading: "Vocation Crisis: 1959-1960." These letters echo others from earlier in the 1950s (found in *The School of Charity*) and suggest a recurring theme in Merton's life: his struggle to find a way of living within the structures of cenobitic monasticism while honoring his own deep call to a more solitary life. The issue of freedom for Merton here was his desire to find a way of realizing his authentic vocation within what he increasingly came to perceive as the restrictive and artificial confines of communal monas-

tic living. The letters reveal Merton's feelings of growing enmity toward cenobitic monasticism in general and Gethsemani in particular during the late 1950s, his capacity for stealth and political intrigue, and his seeming inability to find any reasonable balance on this question.

During the period covered in these letters, he attempts to find a place for himself in Nicaragua, the Virgin Islands, Reno, Nevada, and Cuernavaca, Mexico, among others. There can be no question that at this stage in his journey, Merton felt the solution to his particular vocational crisis was to leave Gethsemani. Freedom meant getting out. The issue was, for Merton, a matter of conscience. He writes to Archbishop Larraona, head of the Sacred Congregation for Religious at the Vatican, describing "the problem of conscience which seriously threatens my spiritual life and my psychological health." The source of this problem? What he refers to as his ongoing "participation in a monastic facade" (206). He puts the issue in even stronger terms in a letter to Father Jean Danielou: "It is a question of choice between a bourgeois, inert, decadent façade of monasticism, and a genuine living attempt to renew the inner spirit of monastic life" (211).

Merton does not succeed in convincing his superiors and eventually accepts their decision that he should remain at Gethsemani. But it is a decision only half-heartedly accepted by Merton. The process continues with endless stops and starts, during which time a great deal of ill-will builds up between Merton and his superiors. He accuses Dom James Fox of plotting against him in Rome, of keeping important mail from him, of "having an arbitrary and tyrannical spirit (216)." He describes his superiors as "having the self-righteous, deluded complacency of their class" (211). And he does this even while he is "accepting," "consenting" to the will of God expressed through his superiors, and expressing his enduring love for Gethsemani (215). But within a month, he is writing again to Cardinal Valeri to, in effect, restate his case. Within six months, he is writing to Archbishop Philippe, secretary to the Sacred Congregation for Religious, to officially reopen the case. None of these efforts bore any immediate fruit. It would be five years until Merton was allowed to become a hermit at Gethsemani. But the episode as a whole reveals with new clarity how fundamentally conflicted he was over the course his life should take, how hostile his negotiations with his superiors became, how erratic his own behavior could be, in short, how long and hard he struggled to realize a level of genuine freedom and authenticity in his monastic life.

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The letters under the section "War and Freedom" contain the largest single collection of the "Cold War Letters" (smaller numbers of which have appeared in earlier volumes), a series of letters Merton wrote from October 1961 to October 1962 concerning issues of war and peace. Taken together with numerous other letters in this section on war and non-violent resistance, the "Cold War Letters" give us new insight into the evolution of Merton's thinking during one of the most creative and tension-filled periods of his life. Here he addresses the issue of fundamental human freedom under siege by the collectivist, materialist structures of power that dominate the contemporary world. The preface to the "Cold War Letters" sounds a note we will hear again and again, that the root of the Cold War mentality is a profound cultural and moral decay: "during the Cold War . . . this country has become frankly a warfare state built on affluence, a power structure in which the interests of big business, the obsessions of the military, and the phobias of political extremists both dominate and dictate our national policy" (20). He says, "we are living in a condition where we are afraid to see the total immorality and absurdity of total war" (22). In a postscript to the "Cold War Letters," written to Rachel Carson, Merton speaks of the profound cultural sickness at the heart of the ecological crisis: "I would almost dare to say that the sickness is perhaps a very real and dreadful hatred of life as such, of course subconscious, buried under our pitiful and superficial optimism about ourselves and our affluent society" (71).

He offers this diagnosis as a member of an ecclesial community, and he takes his ecclesial identity seriously. Yet, Merton expresses deep skepticism about the possibility of finding the necessary moral integrity and courage for resisting this decay within the Catholic Church. To John Ford he writes, "I am very deeply concerned with what seems to me to be the extreme reticence and hesitation on the part of Catholics who might take a position for peace . . ." (29). He writes to Gerald Landry about his feeling of helplessness: "not only helpless to understand God's designs in allowing his Church to become so completely implicated in the motives and ideals of the secular world, and its obsessions (some of which are pathological), but helpless to know what we should do about it ourselves" (44).

The struggle to speak out against what he perceived to be a great moral evil appears to have affected Merton on a deep level. Writing

to Edward Deming Andrews, he speaks of "the ghastly feeling that we are all on the brink of spiritual defection and betrayal of Christ" (25). To Archbishop Thomas Robert, Merton says: "this is . . . to me a shattering and totally disconcerting question [that] . . . reaches down into the very foundations of my life" (24). Writing to Clare Booth Luce in December 1961, he speaks of the past Christmas as having been "the darkest in my life" (25). Nor is this sense of desolation merely personal. It is theological, even cosmological. Merton writes to Rabbi Steven Schwarzschild of "God's absence . . . His loneliness, His loss among us . . . He waits among us unknown and silent, patiently, for the moment when we will finally destroy Him utterly in His image . . . And leave Him alone again in the empty cosmos" (36).

We also hear in these letters more positive, hopeful notes, attempts to respond constructively to these grave threats and give voice to the sources of hope. He writes to Stephen James, whose peace hostage program Merton supported as being "a bold and original effort to meet the inhuman situation with some kind of human response" (87). In an open letter to the Catholic bishops who were about to deliberate on Schema XIII at the Second Vatican Council, Merton urges them "to bear witness clearly and without any confusion to the Church's belief in the power of love to save and transform not only individuals but society." He asks: "Do we or do we not believe that love has this power? If we believe it, what point is there in splitting hairs about the superior morality of killing a thousand defenseless non-combatants rather than a million?" (92). And to Barbara Hubbard, he speaks of the necessity of highlighting the "religious dimension" to the current thinking about the massive death wish pervading society. The religious dimension, he says, shows itself in "radical self-criticism and openness and a profound ability to *trust* not only in our chances of a winning gamble, but in an inner dynamism of life itself, a basic creativity, a power of life to win over entropy and death" (73). This section of *Witness to Freedom* gives new depth and texture to our understanding of Merton's commitment to justice and of his acute diagnosis of the pervasive social, cultural religious malaise pervading American life in the early 1960s.

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Another expression of Merton's growing sense of freedom seen in this collection of letters is the transition from an early, more struc-

tured, devotional form of piety, to a more profound, expansive, integrative, encompassing sense of the spiritual life. Freedom here is expressed through Merton's insistence on the need to throw off unnecessary structures and systems in religious life and in the Church in order to pursue God and the true self with naked honesty. Writing to Sister Anita Wasserman, a Carmelite, in 1952, one senses already Merton's intuitive vision of contemplative simplicity, a vision that would deepen in later years: "Do you really think that you will find Jesus in Carmel? Then go. What you are looking for is Jesus, and He is hidden. You are not just looking for an interesting life with him: you are looking for Him. To find Him is to be hidden even from oneself" (178). To a religious who is striving to uncover within herself and her community an authentic spirituality, in spite of the difficulties presented by formal religious life, Merton counsels simplicity. One should "teach people to seek continual, conscious awareness of God . . . continual openness to God, attentiveness, listening, disposability, etc. In terms of Zen, it is not awareness of but simple awareness" (197).

Stripping away the external, the superficial, the unnecessary—this is what Merton seeks for himself and for others. Merton concurs with Sister Maria Blanca Olim, who writes to him about her concerns about overactivity in Benedictine monasticism, that this is indeed a serious threat to the whole monastic enterprise. Monastic communities need to take care not to disregard what is after all the primary motivation (especially among the young) for those entering monastic life: "a great desire for freedom, simplicity, spontaneity, true poverty, authenticity in everything, and the total absence of formality and pretense" (198). To Fr. David Kirk, he writes of the need to focus on that which is essential in the spiritual life—life itself: "What is badly, urgently wanted is *life* and not this frozen, living death formula for 'perfection' in which all vital development is forcible crushed and negated from the very start" (307). It is consistent with Merton's lifelong attraction to the apophatic way, the way of emptiness, that he seeks the heart of life by simplifying, uncluttering. In this spirit, he counsels another religious that: "There is a certain value in just disciplining oneself to be 'empty' and to spend a certain time *doing nothing*" (199).

One sees in these letters how Merton's increasing capacity to encounter God in naked unknowing bore fruit in a spirit of genuine spontaneity and freedom. The spirituality of his later years is marked by

this unerring sense of God's hidden presence in the heart of *life*. A man named John Brooks, writing a book on the habits of successful persons, asks Merton about his "formula for success." Merton senses the irony inherent in the question, but responds sincerely of his quest for truth: "My 'formula for success' actually has no bearing on success itself. My aim in life is to live as I think I was created to live: in truth, in simplicity with all my attention devoted to what is higher and greater than I: the God I serve and the world of man I believe he redeemed" (253). To Robert Menchin, who writes to him in 1966 asking for advice on making career changes, Merton offers this: "In all the changes we make in life, we should decide . . . in view of becoming *more* real, entering more authentically into direct contact with life, living more as a free and mature human person, able to give myself more to others, able to understand myself and the world better" (255).

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This is the voice of a person who has himself reached a place of profound freedom, who has developed a keen sense of God's vital presence in the ordinary, and who bears witness to the enormous power of such freedom for a world snared in a web of fear and evasion. One of the most impressive things about Merton's witness to freedom is that he was able to bear witness even when he could not see clearly himself. Here we see two prominent themes in Merton's life—darkness and freedom—converge.

In a letter written to Herbert Mason in 1959, during the period when Merton was in the throes of his vocational crisis, he expresses his gratitude for the presence of grace in his life—"the fact that God has given Himself completely to us already. Completely. But we have to enter into the darkness of His presence. Not tragic darkness, just ordinariness: but above all what does not appear to be religion" (262). And a few months later: "When it is dark, it is dark and you go in the dark as if it were light. *Nox illuminatio mea*. The darkness is our light and that is all. The light remains, simply, our everyday mind, such as it is, floating on a sea of darkness which we do not have to observe. But it carries us with great power. It is the being carried that is, actually, its light. Float then. And trust the winds of God, which you do not see either, but they are cool" (263). Freedom then, is realized only in darkness, only in abandoning every support that is less than God. In that darkness one is carried, endlessly, effortlessly on

the cool winds of God. This is the heart of Merton's enduring witness to freedom.

Thomas Merton and Robert Lax. *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. Foreword by Br. Patrick Hart. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1994. 128 pages. \$9.95.

Reviewed by Erlinda G. Paguio

In an interview Robert Lax gave to Paul Wilkes for a film on Thomas Merton, Lax remembers the certainty of his friendship with Merton from the moment they met in 1936 while working as editors of Columbia University's *Jester*.

A small collection of "A Catch of Anti-letters" first appeared in a short-lived literary journal called *Voyages*. When it was published as a book in 1978, some reviewers considered it as nothing more than just the record of two friends enjoying themselves in correspondence. Its reprinting in 1994 is a timely and welcome complement to the five-volume collection of Merton's letters published within the last ten years. This collection of correspondence between Merton and Lax differs from the others because Merton himself selected and edited them a year before his accidental death in December 1968. They are anti-letters because both friends deliberately discard all the formalities of letter writing while engaged in a lively and humorous exchange of ideas and experiences. Merton was a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani while Lax was in self-imposed exile in Greece.

They address each other in many ways, some of which are familiar only to themselves. Merton greets Lax with "Dear Waldo," "Ho Lexos," "Cher Monty," "Dear Most," etc. Lax is equally endearing in his salutation: "Dear Captain Thurston," "Dear Arthur," "Dear Zwow," "Dear Hoopsaboy," etc. Imaginative are the ways in which they end their letters. Merton closes with: "Yrs. Demosthenes," "Yr. pal Cassidy," etc. Lax often uses "yrs, Sam," but will also sign "yrs. Lycourges," or "yrs. Tiger," etc.

Although they continuously write run-on sentences, consciously forget all the rules of grammar, punctuation, spelling and syntax, their