

Thomas Merton. *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 4: 1960–1963*. Edited with introduction by Victor A. Kramer. Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., General Editor. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996. xix + 360 pages. \$30.00

Reviewed by Daniel Carrere, O.C.S.O.

In this fourth tome of Merton's seven volume saga, we observe a gifted but sometimes adolescent and archetypal monk maturing into a kenotically real human being. In a comprehensive embrace, the transformation unifies the dichotomy of divine and secular, paradoxically, through Merton's increasingly eremitical praxis. Long seeking a monastic discipline "capable of understanding the mystery of the contemporary world" (330), Merton reflects (under the journal's concluding date) that the hermit "returns" concretely to history as an agent of divine love, dwelling "fully in a world which is for him no longer bewitched" (349).

Be that as it may, much if not most of the journal's political comment is simplistic and without nuance. If there was ever a concern that Merton's peace writings represented one who was ambivalent about Communism, this volume makes it clear that he was a partisan anti-Communist. Thus, and in part due to his romantic and emotional links with pre-Castro Cuba, Merton fails to register any awareness of the horror that life under Batista was often a cruel and unusual punishment and that the calamity of the revolution was that its promise of liberation short-circuited with the vicious substitution of one oppression for another.

At other moments Merton is impossibly abrupt and vague; one is unable to discern whether he is superficial anew or privy to genuine understanding. Lamenting our government's failure to be "a real leader in democracy for both Americas," he observes from the cloister that "Castro gave the U.S. first chance to assume this role, and the U.S. did not respond" (13). Might this be a hint of awareness about the greatest tragedy of the Cuban fiasco? Truman (in Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking* [New York: Berkley, 1974]) insisted that the Soviet usurpation of Cuba need not have occurred and that what became the threatening malignancy at the heart of Latin America and the costly distraction on our Caribbean flank was the result of Eisenhower's failure to act presi-

dentially. Instead of immediately intervening with direct, personal diplomacy upon Castro's success, inviting the victor to Washington and offering whatever assistance the beleaguered island desired, the general sat at his desk awaiting staff reports to direct his thinking. The history of the hemisphere could have been altered profoundly, but Merton's entry is too cryptic to ascertain the depth of his comprehension.

At odd moments, Merton places his finger on the eternal dilemma of the U.S. psyche and of our international motivations. Proclaiming democracy, we are nevertheless content to export only capitalism: "We have political *ideals* that are more and more removed from and in contradiction with what we intend to do, what we 'must do,' because we are bound above all and before all else to 'make money' and to safeguard our profits" (20, Merton's emphasis). Thus, in the arena of foreign affairs—he seems to assert—capitalist pragmatics are confused with and supplant democratic ideals, all redounding to our advantage as the market economies of other peoples fortify our own coffers and standard of living.

Elsewhere, Merton naively adopts the propaganda of cold war paranoia, excoriating the "optimism of F.D.R., who was fooled by Stalin" (103). Presumably, he alludes to the partition of Eastern Europe into the Soviet camp at Yalta. With the collapse of the Communist empire, this complaint may be set aside if not recognized for its opacity: Discounting the fact that Russia had suffered the greatest traumas in subduing the Nazis and that only ignobility could have ignored its demands for a European buffer, Merton's position fails to perceive that Winston Churchill, shrewd student of global politics and of the turbulent Balkans and Eastern Europe in particular, sat indomitably at Roosevelt's side. It is more than likely these two strategists knew exactly what they were doing. What appeared to Merton and to many as a sad gratuity proved to be a Trojan horse. *Inter alia*, it was the centrifugal forces of its captive provinces that agitated the U.S.S.R. incessantly and ultimately forced Gorbachev to dismantle the cumbersome empire. Without the cacophony of its satellites, Communist Russia might have entrenched itself indefinitely.

Finally, the reader is aghast at Merton's shockingly cruel assessment of the Red Chinese multitudes (for whom he professes "great love and compassion") in "their fabulous sacrifices and suffering" to industrialize the feudal country. "The system is terrible," Merton summarily dismisses its tyranny, "but the work has to be done, and there

is no doubt that capitalism was helpless to do it" (146). In other words, in this instance, means are permitted to justify ends. The curious irony, as Merton devotees will immediately recognize, is that Merton vigorously protested the advance of industrialization and technology in the ambiance of his own existence.

The predominant focus of Merton's "turn to the world" targets his concern for peace amid the escalating tension of superpower hostility. An unexpected but important clarification arises in the discovery that Merton is no monolithic or doctrinaire pacifist. Reading of the Battle of Britain as prelude to German invasion of England, Merton is compelled to reflect that "[t]here is no question possible of absolute, unqualified pacifism in the light of this. The Nazis had to be fought and were fought bravely by my people. . . . There is no question *Dictatorship must be fought*, if possible non-violently. But if that is not possible, then violently" (114–5, Merton's emphasis and majuscule).

For Merton, peace is not capitulation. While there is no doubt in his mind that "for all our faults, we represent a better and more decent life than Russia or China ever could" (116), the contemporary situation appeared overwhelmingly apocalyptic; only madness could entertain a nuclear arms race, atmospheric testing, or flirt with the specter of annihilation.

Merton's anti-war essays were spurred, in large measure, by the scandalous ecclesial and ethical environment: the aggressive predilections of bishops, "prejudices of fat men with vested interests" (178, most notably New York's Cardinal Spellman), the paleolithic obtuseness of theologians, and the peculiar proclivity of Jesuits to champion, in the early 1960's the machine-gunning defense of one's personal fallout shelter against encroaching neighbors. There can be no doubt, however, that an equally significant stimulant was Merton's ongoing conflict with Abbot James Fox. The peace enterprise sublimated Merton's own hostile energies. In fact, one interpretation of the journal's data indicates that Gandhi's non-violence was first embraced as a resolution to Merton's personal war; once this transformative praxis quieted his own bellicose environment, he was free to contemplate broader horizons and spontaneously applied Gandhi's philosophy to the cold war crisis. When the head of the Order blocked publication of his "peace book" because, Merton conjectured, the French cleric was adamant that his own government should secure the bomb, Merton turned his energies to the problems of racial equality then cauterizing the nation.

In spite of the title, the book's principal value concerns Merton's personal odyssey and transformation. Just as a reader, familiar with volume three, approaches the midpoint verging on despair that this tome is simply more of the same carping, ad nauseam, one senses a re-orientation of Merton's psychic and spiritual climate—not unlike that which transpires in Hammarskjöld's *Markings*. Before this perception can be questioned, Merton registers his own awareness, noting the possibility of "a new turning, a new attitude, an inner change" (167). Within the month he senses anew the emergence of "a turning point in my spiritual life," and this consciousness burgeons into a celebration: "I am happy that I have turned a corner, perhaps the last corner in my life . . . homegoing joy" (172, 173).

It is almost scandalous that an adult of forty-six years was such a problem to himself, but this is to neglect the foundational hermeneutic of kenosis. The very contortions of Merton's drama indicate a healthy spirit robustly facing the challenges of incarnation; its testimony offers an encouragement that if he can remain faithful to his deepest, most authentic aspirations, so can we.

It is here that we begin to comprehend the graced but monumental achievement of Thomas Merton. Rather than being overcome by, or simply surviving, a vapid, bankrupt spirituality and institutional pathology, Merton creatively and sapientially embraced—relying utterly upon a faithful God—an exodus beyond the mindless but structured evasions of what Kierkegaard has called "Christendom." Merton is an exemplar of the pathos that Kierkegaard has underscored is the only task worthy of a lifetime: becoming a Christian in Christendom. Challenged by his monastic precincts to a deeper life (and although he is too facilely called a mystic by some), the solution toward which Merton is working—not systematically but experientially—might be called incarnational mysticism or, better and only apparently redundant, incarnational humanism.

What these journals are bearing witness to is a process of dissolution and rebirth. Plagued by a romantic disposition that Kierkegaard called the "aesthetic," Merton spent his early monastic years absorbed narcissistically in the immediacy of religious symbolism. The symbols had not yet given rise to thought. Only when his milieu betrayed those romantic symbols could Merton experience the questions asked of him by Life; yet he remained trapped—as the journal so frequently attests—within the dead artifacts of tribal worship and cultural religion, the futile hegemony of aesthetic symbolism.

In something of an epiphany that corroborated his inclination to solitude, Merton gleaned from his reading that the true function of a symbol is to "serve as an agent of release—into *nada*"—so that one is disengaged from the symbol's protection "to meet directly the *mysterium tremendum* of the unknown" (241).

In the kenotic space of a hermitage, Merton could meditatively face the absolute mystery, discovering and learning to embody, through the kenotic and life-giving Spirit, the simple but graced humanity of the incarnating Word. Through these pivotal years, it was the solitary praxis of this all-embracing Word that led Merton to affirm that the "great question today is really the question of Christian humanism" (143).

It is most interesting that Merton moved gradually into solitude through ecumenical dialogue. What eventually proved to be a hermitage was initially constructed to house occasional but ongoing discussion with visiting Methodists, Baptist, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians who came to Gethsemani in the atmosphere of Vatican II. Significantly, Pope John XXIII remained an avid, if distant, witness to these collegial gatherings.

Readers will find it rewarding to compare, as the editor suggests, select entries with their edited and annotated appearances in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. While a comparison with the original holograph would result in a number of corrections, anyone who has seen Merton's handwriting recognizes the extraordinary task Victor A. Kramer and his fellow editors have performed.

One editorial policy must be protested. Merton was in the habit of identifying, often parenthetically, those of whom he wrote. With regard to private persons, these identifications are irrelevant in all instances of negative or critical comment. The editors have egregiously compounded the infraction by identifying some individuals through the bracketed insertion of full names or surnames. It is unconscionable to lionize Merton at the expense of others.