

In his life, and in his vocation, Merton proved masterful in bridging the gap between seemingly irreconcilable opposites. In an old church, and in an old way of living, he injected a sense of the new. In a secular world corrupted by war and social injustice, he delivered a message of peace and understanding. In a time of cautious ecumenism, he boldly embraced the truths of the East to further affirm the truths of the West. And from a silent vantage point, his words were heard by millions. How fitting, then, that even in death, Merton's voice has been preserved; how appropriate, that in the era of the sound byte, we have in these tapes so many little nuggets of wisdom and joy.

Oh, these tapes aren't a cornerstone of Merton studies. They don't represent his best work, his best ideas. Yet they do represent a special invitation, for like the words of any great teacher, they beckon us to come closer, to listen, to see more deeply for ourselves. They continue to be an important part of any Merton library.

David King

INCHAUSTI, Robert, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 210. ISBN 0-7914-3635-7 (paperback). \$19.95.

Robert Inchausti skillfully weaves together two competing narrative lines in his refreshing and compelling story, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*. First, Inchausti moves Merton out of the familiar and safe harbor of the Catholic tradition and into the mainstream of American literary and intellectual history. In doing so, Inchausti rediscovers, secondly, Merton's crucial place in the tradition of Catholic monasticism and, more importantly, the vitality of Merton's contemplative spirituality as a viable alternative to prevailing twentieth-century ideologies, including the empty security of materialism and the false promises of progress, the audacious desperation of modernism and, most recently, postmodernism's invitation to plunge into a free fall of disbelief. By locating Merton on the American literary landscape, Inchausti is one of the first critics to develop fully Merton's place in the tradition of dissenting individualism that scribes an arc in American literary history from William Bradford and John Winthrop, through Thoreau and Emily Dickinson, to Ralph Ellison and Rachel Carson. Merton can then be viewed as belonging to and extending the lineage of American writers who, driven by moral resolve and the pull of conscience, drift to the margins of society where they answer the ethical call to critique the culture of conformism at the soft core of American life.

Inchausti understands Merton well enough, however, that he wisely develops his argument about Merton's place on the literary map dialectically, in *contradistinction* to dominant trends in American letters. The Merton that emerges, then, is both an apostle of American adversarial literary culture and its dissenter—an expatriate very much at home in the American woods, a Henry Miller with a halo. As Merton himself says, 'my own peculiar task in my Church and in my world has been that of the solitary explorer who, instead of jumping on all the latest bandwagons at once, is bound to search the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities, and in those certainties which lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety'.

In a word, Robert Inchausti's Merton is an American original who struggles to find a 'quiet but articulate place' where he can navigate a personal search for

meaning and report back on his progress. In developing Merton simultaneously at odds and in step with the lineages of cultural, literary, and religious tradition, Inchausti creates a portrait that is authentic, complex, multi-layered, insightful, and at the same time clearly resonant with an original and unifying vision of Thomas Merton's prophecy:

[T]he most singular aspect of Merton's witness was his unflagging need to expose bad faith in fashions and in antifashions, in belief and in unbelief, indeed to chase down inauthenticity whenever and wherever it reared its ugly, complacent head and demand accountability. In the process of calling everyone's bluff—including his own—he discovered a hidden unity beyond the bogus distinctions born of human pride (p. 145).

Inchausti tracks the theme of Thomas Merton's prophetic individualism chronologically. He combines biographical material and a critical survey of Merton's principal writings, making the study a solid and serviceable introduction to Merton's life and work. By blocking in these critical elements against a backdrop of intellectual history, Inchausti extends the book's depth of field in a way that will appeal to and benefit a range of readers, including those who may not be otherwise drawn to a critical study of Thomas Merton. In the best tradition of Merton criticism, Inchausti also finds an authentic voice in his dialogue with Merton. Inchausti *listens* to Merton's most prophetic and, at the same time, most personal claim: 'I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self.' Merton's writings, Inchausti reflects, 'close the gap between the readers' exterior, historical lives and their undetermined, interior freedom—between their worldly selves tied to illusory dreams and ambitions and the new Adam they are all in the process of becoming' (p. 3). It is this rare combination of biographer, critic, intellectual historian, visionary and *writer* that gives Inchausti the right alloy to interpret Thomas Merton to the widest possible audience and position him in the canon of twentieth-century letters.

Inchausti is at his best when he mines the richness of Thomas Merton's paradoxes, ironies and ambivalences. He understands that Merton must be met at the crossroads of his personal search for inner freedom and self-transcendence and his desperate attempt to make sense of the terrible condition of modern society—a tension ratcheted up by Merton's lifelong, unflinching examination of conscience and his passionate embrace of contemplation. From the very beginning of his life as a young writer, Inchausti argues, Merton sought to reconcile the impersonal, tragic forces of history—two World Wars, the Cold War, the ascendance of suffocating nationalist ideologies—and the discovery of an authentic self in 'deep continuity with the spiritual traditions of the past' (p. 41). The young Thomas Merton, Inchausti writes, 'was concerned not only with his place in the world but with the meaning of war and the rise of totalitarian states'. He was trying—as early as *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Journal of my Escape from the Nazis*—'to move beyond both tragic and epic conceptions of history and his own personal life to arrive at some as yet unfathomed spiritual point of view' (p. 23). In his concluding chapter, Inchausti revisits the defining irony of Thomas Merton's life:

By turning away from the world, he reentered it from the other side. By refusing the false optimism of the new postwar professional class, he established himself as the premier American outsider... who bravely stood up at mid-century for the autonomy of the interior life and 'the third position of integrity.'

His influence... was profound but largely clandestine, operating in that history within history that contains both the writer's quest for sociophilosophical gnosis and the mystic's search for God (p. 151).

Here lies the essence, then, of Inchausti's reading of Merton's prophetic individualism. By journeying into the inner life of solitude, Thomas Merton came into dialogue with a fallen world. 'This inner "I," who is always alone', Merton writes in *Disputed Questions*, 'is always universal; for in this inmost "I" my own solitude meets the solitude of every other [person] and the solitude of God'. The narrative architecture of *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* follows that paradox of universality through radical separation from Merton's early life, his education, conversion and monastic training, through Merton's major writings and the influences that shaped his intellectual life and spiritual journey.

Examples of Inchausti's technique of interpreting Merton in contradistinction to contemporary literary figures and major intellectual movements include a penetrating chapter on Merton and Norman Mailer and a closing chapter on Merton and postmodernism.

On Merton and Mailer, whose first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, burst onto the literary scene the same year *The Seven Storey Mountain* and brought its author considerable celebrity, Inchausti writes:

[B]oth shared the overriding belief that before one could battle the emerging technocracy, one had to withdraw deliberately to the margins of society. The key difference was that Mailer 'withdrew' by following the dangerous imperatives of the self in an attempt to dispense with his socially constructed superego. Merton, on the other hand, attempted to transcend the ego altogether through the disciplines of the contemplative life (p. 80).

In a similar vein, Inchausti notes the temptation to align Merton with certain quarters of poststructural thought, due mostly to his radical critique of prevailing myths of modernity. But it is not a fruitful comparison, Inchausti believes. Where most postmodern thinkers refuse to acknowledge access to any source of identity or Being beyond the endless surface play of words and language systems, for Merton, Inchausti reminds us, 'the silent self (our real self) is accessible'—not through a mastery of the sign systems that constitute culture and the social constructs of identity, but through the arts of *listening* and contemplative discipline.

[A]lthough Merton might agree that we are all born into illusory identities, indeed that our very notions of self are ipso facto fictions, he also believes we are all born into Being. Indeed, Being supersedes consciousness and contains it. There is no need to find ourselves, we merely have to overcome the illusion that we were ever lost (p. 132).

Given its moral torpidity, Inchausti correctly surmises that 'Merton's ideas are totally antithetical' to postmodern thinking. His work is far too 'contextual, specific... existential' (p. 134) to amount to much more than a counterpoint to postmodernism's grinding obsession with epistemological doubt and ontological relativism and its refusal to grapple with what troubles modern individuals—postmodern intellectuals included—most: as Inchausti unflinchingly puts it, 'the moral insignificance of their lives' (p. 150).

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