

by a Merton expert opens this set as it did the previous one, but this time it is accurate, being in fact the identical recording by Michael Higgins found on *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classic Literature*, moved from an Introduction to an Afterword and needing no alteration because it had originally discussed only those conferences explicitly on Faulkner, not the other four.

Presumably the various slip-ups found in the descriptions, both written and oral, in these sets were due to recent personnel changes at the company and will not be repeated as the newer staff gains more experience. While the complicated mingling of new and reissued material poses some difficulties for the prospective buyer, the additional conferences made available in these recordings make a valuable contribution to what Now You Know rightly refers to as Merton's "spoken-word legacy."

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GORDON, Mary, *On Thomas Merton* (Boulder, CO: Shambala, 2018), pp. 147. ISBN: 978-1-61180-337-2 (cloth) \$22.95.

Professor of English at Barnard College and a successful novelist based in New York who identifies with both feminism and Roman Catholicism, Mary Gordon has written a highly readable little book entitled simply *On Thomas Merton*. This appropriately vague and impressionistic title signals to prospective readers that this is by no means another "definitive" book on the Trappist monk and writer, but a handful of highly subjective reflections by one writer on another.

The opening chapter shows Gordon's private struggle with Thomas Merton, whom she once rejected for *The Seven Storey Mountain*¹ ("a reason not to read any further in his oeuvre" [42]), but who nonetheless attracted her for representing "the best that progressive, politically engaged Catholicism might be" (2). When invited to give a lecture to celebrate the Merton centennial in 2015, she had to make up for over fifty years of willful neglect ("what I'd read of him had no resonance with me" [1]). Fortunately, she discovered Merton's journals – and "fell in love" (4). Readers of Gordon's *On Thomas Merton* will find the book full of such emotional reactions, gut responses and intimate quarrels with the monk and writer Gordon either praises or castigates for stylistic, rhetorical or ideological reasons. She is a passionate writer. For her there is no middle ground, a territory of neutral scholarship and balanced criticism; she is either hot or cold. She seems to need passion to drive her projects. But what is an asset for a novelist can become a liability for a critic. When read – and this is, arguably, one of

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

Gordon's ambitions – as a contribution to Merton Studies, this book is far from successful.

First of all, however, we need to applaud the author for identifying a blind spot in the growing body of Merton criticism. Intending to speak “writer to writer,” the author rightly draws our attention to the lack of any sustained examination of Merton as primarily a writer himself. Although ambivalent about big ambitions, she does confess to having “felt called upon” (5) to “uncouple the writer from the priest” and explore “what kind of writer” he had been, a task her “elders and betters” could not successfully accomplish (7). The question that imposes itself at this point, however, is this: can one really understand Merton the writer without attending to his monastic vocation and theological development? After all, if he was a writer, he was principally a contemplative one, and this contemplative dimension cannot be separated from any meaningful consideration of his writing craft. Thus, for instance, faulting *The Seven Storey Mountain* for bigoted narrow-mindedness and a violent rejection of the world, Gordon fails to recognize Merton's conversion as a real existential breakthrough experience that reconfigured his perception of reality. Merton's discovery of the monastic vocation was for the brilliant but confused New York intellectual a literal salvation, and his autobiography renders this experience in the most authentic voice possible. It would take Merton over a decade to readjust his vision and reclaim the world on a new level. But then another autobiography needed to be written (I will elaborate on this point later).

Struggling with the questions besetting all writers (target audiences, reasons for writing, obligations of a writer to her/himself and to the larger world, logistics of the publishing process, etc.), Gordon believes herself to be uniquely equipped to tap into the challenges Merton faced in his own writing career. I need to confess, though, that I am not entirely convinced a lay author raising a family and earning a living can legitimately translate her writing experience onto the matrix of a celibate monk's cloistered, and later eremitic, life. It seems that a monk works and thinks within a different set of limitations (as well as privileges). Thus, to give just one example, Gordon's harsh judgment of the silences surrounding Merton's Cambridge year in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (49-50) should be understood through the lens of the interventions of monastic censorship, which cannot be easily compared to other forms of censorship. To put it bluntly, monastic superiors allowed Merton to publish his autobiography on condition that the more unsettling truth *not* be told. As a monk whose writing talent was to serve the monastery, he had no choice but obey. As a writer compelled to share the story of his life with others (as writers are), he had little choice either.

Moreover, if it is to be taken as a serious critical intervention, Gordon's

project is compromised by what she decides to exclude from the orbit of her considerations, exclusions that, as evidenced by the text itself, result largely from her lack of acquaintance with a substantial portion of the Merton canon. As a consequence, her portrayal of Merton-the-writer is bound to be incomplete at best, untrue at worst. Sadly, Gordon's "discard" category embraces some of Merton's most mature, most challenging writings. This is what she eliminates: texts on Eastern religions ("I am far from an expert on Eastern religion [*sic!*], and it seemed better to leave discussion of that aspect of his writing to others who are better trained"), poetry ("he's not as great a poet as I wish he was"), and literary criticism ("which seems unremarkable to me") (6). Also, without explicitly acknowledging it, she problematically leaves out Merton's writings on Christian spirituality and contemplation (it may be that Gordon is not an expert on the mystical tradition in any, not only Eastern, religion) and the vast body of Merton's correspondence beyond a brief albeit engaging analysis of his epistolary exchange with Czeslaw Milosz and Evelyn Waugh. It is to be regretted that for balance Gordon did not include at least a passing reference to Merton's correspondence with left-wing writers, especially those associated with the U.S. poetic avant-garde. Perhaps then she would not have to "regret that Merton never had a real peer whose criticism would be of use to him" (28).

Those omissions are instructive; they tell us much about the author's methodology and the resulting misrepresentation of Merton as a writer. Firstly, her low opinion on Merton's poetry is clearly based on his early, and weakest, verses, while the daring poetic experiments of the late 1950s and the 1960s seem completely unknown to the author. Had she read *Cables to the Ace*² or *The Geography of Lograire*,³ she would know that "Confessional poetry" did enter Merton's "literary sphere" (6) and that the masterful combination of "the spiritual and political" that Gordon finds in the "great Denise Levertov" (6) can also be found in Merton's poems. But she failed to read beyond "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943" and "Elegy for the Monastery Barn" (6). The same point may be raised concerning Gordon's rejection of Merton's literary criticism – she had been put off by the early reviews, which clearly *are* "unremarkable," and thus never discovered Merton's fascinating texts on Boris Pasternak and William Faulkner, or his prophetic writings on William Styron, Roland Barthes and Flannery O'Connor, to give just a few examples. How can one expect to

2. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968); Thomas Merton, *The Complete Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 393-454 (subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) (subsequent references will be cited as "GL" parenthetically in the text); CP 455-609.

learn about the “true” writer Thomas Merton from a book flawed by such omissions? It is here that the book’s title serves as a reminder of the more limited, more subjective agenda of Gordon’s project.

So, what works by Thomas Merton *have* been included in this little book? From what texts has Gordon built her case? Predictably, she has chosen those that “spoke most directly” (7) to her: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *My Argument with the Gestapo*⁴ and the journals.⁵ Already the first choice is as obvious as it is problematic. True, one cannot assess Merton as writer without referencing his most commercially successful, autobiographical work. On the other hand, however, we realize from the start that Gordon’s disapproval of the conversion narrative will color her appreciation of the writer. And true to type, she opines, expecting the reader to nod in full agreement:

I believe it was the vitality of this kind of writing [description of Pop’s office] that allowed many of its 600,000 readers to read through or skip past the pious and esoteric inside baseball that marks so much of the book. What could any secular “common reader” make of the many passages drenched in hyper-Mariolatry, when Merton swims in his new privileged position of the most fortunate of the newly baptized? (44-45)

Resisting the temptation to complicate the – far from obvious – “common reader” category, I am nonetheless compelled to contradict Gordon’s glib value judgment, one among many she so easily dispenses throughout her book. Like many spiritual seekers throughout the world (and I guess this would be Merton’s target audience), I was hooked on *The Seven Storey Mountain* not despite but *because of* its authentic, existential spirituality; its deconstruction of superficial worldliness; its embrace of Ultimate Truth (as we saw it then). Likewise, his “hyper-Mariolatry” and other “pious

4. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969); subsequent references will be cited as “MAG” parenthetically in the text.

5. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995); Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

inside baseball” was bound to ring true to any reader, especially of Roman Catholic persuasion, familiar with the writings of Christian mystics. I find it odd that Gordon fails to grasp the basic fact that a mystic is a person in love, consumed by it, devoting his whole life, every single thought and action, to his beloved. What she finds so disturbing – especially Merton’s ardent dialogues with Our Lady – evidence his passionate devotion to Ultimate Reality, a mystic’s urge to be in the presence of something that both transcends and conditions his existence. On a less mystical level, though, I find Gordon guilty of classical projection. Speaking from the midst of a particular cultural mindset, she arrogantly claims to be speaking for “any secular ‘common reader’” with their diverse cultural, racial, ableist, class, spiritual etc. agendas. And she faults Merton for the same transgressions she commits herself – like dogmatism and narrow-mindedness.

Gordon’s second choice is *My Argument with the Gestapo*, a pre-Gethsemani novel rejected by a number of publishers at the time of its completion and eventually published in 1969. This is an interesting choice since this – uneven, experimental, largely juvenile – text allows us to grasp the strengths and limitations of Merton as a novelist. Out of his two early autobiographical works, Gordon obviously sympathizes with the latter as, she argues, sketching a daring path Merton should have followed. It is, as the author admits, a writing full of vitality, humor, embodied language, liveliness, lightness, but she finds it marred by occasional heavy-handed argumentative passages – that is, when Merton resorts to “high Catholic rhetoric” (79) – and macaronic passages, which she believes are “a distraction and an annoyance, blemishes on the face of prose that is both arresting and penetrating” (66). I believe Gordon again misses the point, given that the novel’s subtitle is *A Macaronic Journal*. The Joycean word play is there for a reason. Typically, however, Gordon is not interested in the writer’s attempts to liberate himself and his writing from the straitjacket of conventional language. Dispensing advice, she fails to see that Merton was not so much interested in becoming “the best writer he could” (82) as he was in understanding the world and himself in it. That is why he confessed: “I will keep putting things down until they become clear” (*MAG* 53, quoted in Gordon 82). Asking “What would have become of Merton as a writer had he continued to write in the vein of *My Argument with the Gestapo*” (84-85), Gordon further betrays her ignorance of the “late Merton,” the Merton who *did* continue to write in that particular vein, the mature Merton who once again took to writing an autobiography, but this time the auto-, the writing self, was an enlarged version of the Whitman of *Song of Myself*. At the end of his life, at the beginning of his ultimate autobiography *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton placed a declaration of intent that speaks directly to

Gordon's musings. Fittingly, he wrote these words at around the same time he was trying to publish his pre-Gethsemani novel, thereby establishing a direct link between those two works:

A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more and more he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It cannot be purely private, any more than it can be purely public. It cannot be fully communicated. It grows out of a common participation which is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images. (*GL 1*)

Once you substitute "writer" for "poet," Gordon's question becomes superfluous. He did continue writing in that particular vein. *Lograire* is a mixture of genres: of poetry, prose and anti-poetry; it is a collage of quotations and borrowings from a variety of books Merton had been reading; a blending of the living, writing and reading persona whom the world knew – or so it believed – as Thomas Merton. An open-ended, incomplete "first draft of a longer work in progress" (*GL 1*), it reveals the writer Gordon has been tracking, a writer for whom living and writing were one.

Finally, the journals, "Merton's best writing" (87) – here Gordon pours out her heart and lavishes most of her praise, although she predictably tends to "lose sympathy when [Merton] interleaves his romantic gush with an old, discarded piety" (109) in the midst of his love affair of 1966. She quotes profusely from the sources, as if wanting the best of Merton to speak for itself, but there is little new insight concerning the writer. Finally, it seems Gordon has tired of the topic and of her emotional quarrels with the monk, for she offers no concluding chapter, leaving the reader to gather the conclusions for herself.

My overall impression is that this little book, which breaks no new ground and is strongly marked by the author's subjective agendas, will remain a testament to one writer's (mis)readings of another. It is a book I have started calling *Mary Gordon's Merton*. Were she really looking for Merton the writer, she should have overcome her reluctance to read him "past [her] early indifference" (2) not only about *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Malgorzata Poks

MCCASLIN, Susan and J. S. Porter, *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine*, Foreword by Lynn Szabo, Afterword by Jonathan Montaldo (Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake Publishing, 2018), pp. 237. ISBN: 978-1-77343-035-5 (paper) \$24.95.

"His own poems and fables, dramas and songs were works of the spirit,