

OUTER AND INNER LANDSCAPES

Review of
 Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer/
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Two 1941-1952;
 Edited with an Introduction by Jonathan Montaldo
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I have been told that all of our history is written on the “walls” inside us — our upbringing and education, the places we lived and visited, every person we ever loved and who loved us, and, of course, every book we have ever read. Each of us, then, reads a book through our own personal window of experience and understanding of life. When I turned the last page and closed the book of the second volume of Thomas Merton’s private journals, I knew my reading had been filtered through a favorite poem written by one of Merton’s friends and correspondents, Daniel Berrigan.

EACH DAY WRITES
 in my heart’s core
 ineradicably, what it is to be [human].

Hours and hours, no sun rises, night sits
 kenneled in me: or spring, spring’s
 flowering seizes me in an hour.

I tread my heart amazed: what land,
 what skies are these, whose shifting weathers
 now shrink my harvest to a stack of bones;
 now weigh my life with glory?

Christ, to whose eyes flew,
 whose human heart knew, or furious or slow,
 the dark wingbeat of time: your presence give
 light to my eyeless mind, reason to my heart’s
 rhyme.

OUTER LANDSCAPE

“All the hills and woods are red and brown and copper and the sky is clear with only one to two very small clouds. The landscape is getting so saturated with my prayers and psalms and the books I read that it is becoming incomparably rich for me.”

INNER LANDSCAPE

"One day things look one way and then they look another."

"... and love, love, love burned in my heart. Still does. Waves of it come and go. I swim on the waves."

What "each day" wrote in Merton's "heart core" is the substance of eleven years of continuous journal material written at Gethsemani from December, 1941 to July, 1952, published now under the title of *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, the second volume of seven. For the first time we have access to the early private journals in the form in which he wrote them, the vast horizon of his thoughts unedited and the geography of his interior life exposed so like the terrain and shifting weathers of the Berrigan poem.

Three separate journals are brought together in this second volume: the novitiate journal fragment, a journal-memoir of Dom Frederic Dunne, and the journal known as *The Whale and the Ivy*. Less than half of this journal (1946-1952) was published as *The Sign of Jonas*. Since this volume contains some previously published material, a valid question surfaces: Are these journals new contours on old landscapes or are they old contours on new landscapes? They are both. It is Merton's own paradoxical journal entry that is helpful here. "I thought how the silence you find in yourself, when you enter in and rest in God, is always the same and always new, even though it is unchanging." This experience of sameness and newness in entering the silence of contemplation is not much different from the way in which we can approach reading the second volume. No doubt, previously unpublished sections will offer fresh insights to the Merton scholar/ researcher/ teacher and revisiting old material will challenge past insights. Matisse said it: "To look at something as though we had never seen it before requires great courage." A basic reading requirement for the seasoned Merton reader: courage and new eyes. For the first time reader: curiosity and a spirit of adventure.

The journal is enhanced by the editing labor of love of Jonathan Montaldo. Reading "The Scribe's Introduction" last is a mistake. The beauty in the introduction is that it provides a context and lays the groundwork for a nuanced reading of the text. "The Acknowledgments" and "Scribe's Introduction" at one end and the "Daily Schedule at Gethsemani during the 1940's" along with "A Glossary of Monastic Terms" at the other creates a helpful envelope out of which to read the thoughts of the artist, monk and writer.

Within the first few pages of the novitiate journal, we meet the youthful Merton who fled "the woe-begone, sad towns," now a novice in "the Holy House of God . . . on the Holy Hill," writing mostly poetry. In only fourteen handwritten pages remaining of the novitiate journal he left a legacy of seven poems. In the preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader* he admits that "the best Gethsemani poems belong to this period." The rest of Merton's earliest monastic journal — "long since torn up" — is lost to us. It is understandable but regrettable. Understandable, because if you have ever been a fervent novice in a religious community and kept a novitiate journal, tearing up most or all of it seemed like a good idea, but clearly regrettable if you are a Thomas Merton reader.

"Typical American death — died in harness." Terse descriptions such as this one and descriptive words such as: forceful, fervent, austere, uncompromising, gentle and sympathetic come from Merton's observations of his first Abbot in Part II: "A Journal Memoir: Dom Frederic Dunne." Merton thought "it would be useful to put down at random such facts and characteristic traits and actions" about Reverend Father because "someday someone may be able to make us of it." Although disjointed, it is a candid and tender rendering of man who himself wrote poetry and encouraged Merton to write from the start and integrate that gift with the call to solitude.

OUTER LANDSCAPE

"For me landscape seems to be important for contemplation . . . anyway, I have no scruples about loving it."

INNER LANDSCAPE

"Everything hurts me. I want to turn away from everything, lose everything, throw away the world, shake off time, lose all things that are trying to grow on to me like barnacles. Of course I can't do it."

"Words give me pain. Song hurts me. Writing troubles me. Reading puts me into a cloud."

In an early entry in the novitiate journal fragment, Merton asks a fundamental question that remained central throughout his struggle to become a monk and writer: "How will I ever do this?" "Not by any power of my own," he says, and then proceeds to say how he thinks this life he has embraced is to be accomplished. But we know, as perhaps he intuited even then, that it would be a journey, the landscape of which would be dotted with paradoxes and contradictions, questions unanswered and illusions unmasked and it would cover, as he did in "Fire Watch," the lengths, heights and depths, "the strange caverns and geological strata" not only of Gethsemani but of his own inner earth. It is into this journey that we are invited in Part III: "The Whale and the Ivy."

Merton's tensions between the call to solitude and community, woods and church, words and silence, pure contemplative and writer slowly build until the inner earth collapses and the broken down layers of nervous exhaustion become the ground for transformation. ". . . God is with me and He sits in the ruins of my heart." Gradually he named the paradox: ". . . what I have to give up is, in the last analysis, what I am convinced is the most perfect way I could love and serve God." After he named the paradox, it took him the rest of his life TO LIVE the paradox.

Serious archaeological digs. Yes. But the man was not humorless: ". . . and the gramophone inside me is playing that same old tune, 'Admiration, admiration, you are the one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wondered of the Western world.'" Or, "I wonder if Jesus ever got tired of waiting for me to grow up. I hope not."

OUTER LANDSCAPE

"There has been no sun in the sky . . . but the dark days have been magnificent. The sky has been covered with wonderful black clouds, the horizon has been curtained with sheets of traveling rain. The landscape has been splendidly serious. I love the strength of our woods in this bleak weather."

INNER LANDSCAPE

"It is a strange awakening to find the sky inside you and beneath you and above you and all around you so that your spirit is one with the sky, and all is positive night."

Whether to the new or seasoned Merton reader, the value of this volume is many-faceted. Read about his human experience of the grace of transformation. Journey with him as he treads his "heart amazed," probed land, skies, and shifting weathers with questions of solitude, surrender and obedience that only and always ended for him in the silent love of God. "The hand lies open. The heart is dumb." Follow him page after page in the dilemmas and conflicts, through the "blind alleys and stone walls: until God's eyes ask him a question: "Have you had sight of Me, Jonas my child?" Let God's question reach your eyes through Merton's written word, and, in your own frail and fragile layers, and with the entire universe be overshadowed once again — "Mercy within mercy within mercy."