

The Waters of Siloe as Literature: Thomas Merton Glad to be at Home in the Cistercian Order

by **Mary Murray**

One of the books most discarded in the Thomas Merton corpus is his history of the Cistercian order, *The Waters of Siloe* (1949). At Merton conferences people will say “don’t read that — it’s history,” and their corresponding look means “you won’t get anything of value out of that in terms of your spiritual life.” The book was in easy reach when I was on retreat last May at the Abbey of the Genesee, and I had ten minutes before lunch and was too lazy to go upstairs to my room to get a book I had already started. I picked it up wondering what it was that drove people away from it.

In the short ten minutes before lunch I made an amazing discovery: *The Waters of Siloe* is literature, not history. I found myself reading the most charming story, so well written, about a Paris businessman who, unwittingly, had had an apparition of St. Therese of Liseux in a downtown Paris hotel; Merton goes on to say he fixes the undersides of trucks now at a monastery in France. The writing alone — the hilarity blended with the supernatural — glued me to this book, and I decided to read it solely for the good writing.

I am not much at history — my worst subject — and so this book became my breakfast reading, meaning I read it for several months ten minutes at a time, which enabled me not to be overwhelmed with the detail that is, of course, there. But what has to be said about this book is that it is not so much the history of the Cistercian order, but rather Merton’s own claiming for himself the home that he never had: the Cistercian order provided the personality profile, the spiritual practices, the characters, and most importantly the actual historical *lessons* that Merton found true for himself. I mean, history bears out one of Merton’s strongest contentions, and that is that one’s contemplative vocation must be chosen and valued — if it is not, even and especially for active roles (e.g. running an orphanage) the entire enterprise is fruitless. Again and again Merton shows monks who were tempted by situations which seemed good, but were against their contemplative bent, and not one of them proved fruitful.



MARY MURRAY

MARY MURRAY lives in Ithaca, New York, and teaches English and Rhetoric. This paper was delivered at the University of Louisville’s “Twentieth Century American Literature Conference” in February, 1996, while she was attending the first “Scholars Retreat” sponsored by the Thomas Merton Center Foundation. She will co-moderate a workshop on Merton’s “My Lord God” prayer at the Fifth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society.

At the time Merton was writing this book, 1949, he had been in the order for eight years, and was, with great joy, putting down a spiritual root in his community even though later years show him disgruntled and suffering. This book is an important work in the Merton corpus, not so much for the massive effort it must have been to compile, but for the spiritual lessons that reassured him (and us) of the validity and centrality of the contemplative life. What's more, the actual writing of the text can only be described as rollicking: being at home in the order, he injects personal commentary that make this long tome light hearted and entertaining, which could hardly be expected in a history of silent monks that spanned several centuries!

The Lesson of Choosing One's Contemplative Vocation

The history of the Cistercian order, according to Merton, reveals that the contemplative bent must have its way or else certain ruin will follow, even if the pursuits chosen above contemplation are worthy ones. Allowing their "latent activism to run away with them" in forming schools in the early 1800's, Dom Augustin de Lestrange and Dom Urban Guillet made unbelievable sacrifices and acts of valor, yet did not triumph. Here is what Merton has to say:

In spite of the most phenomenal generosity, the most astonishing sufferings and sacrifices and trials — [Dom Urban] went through enough tribulation to canonize a dozen saints — Dom Urban failed in America. His work vanished without a trace, and his memory scarcely survives in his own Order. And even there he is recalled less a saint than as a kind of phenomenon. (p. 62)

Dom Urban's goals of forming schools was ardently necessary at this time in history, but the vocation of the Cistercian — one of the silent contemplation of God — was not valued first and therefore Merton claims this is the reason why his work failed.

Similarly, Petit Clairvaux in Nova Scotia like La Val Sainte suffered a lack of vocations during one period because there was "no interior life, and without interior life it is impossible to support the austerities of the Rule" (p. 94). Further, this lack of interior life can be attributed to the weakening of this life as "a complex of penitential exercises. If these were fulfilled - and it took plenty of action to carry them all out — then one was released from the obligation of cultivating a deep interior spirit of contemplation and could throw oneself wholeheartedly into teaching, preaching, missionary work, and the rest" (p. 94).

When an abbot nurtures the inner life of his monks before all, the Cistercian vocation blossoms. Dom Antoine, of Gethsemani Abbey in the 1830's, abolished the Trappist Third Order of lay teachers. Merton writes that "it has not generally been recognized that this move did as much to save the Cistercian Order as anything that had been attempted since the French Revolution. If teaching had become inseparable from Trappist monasteries, it would have meant a change in the very essence of the Cistercian vocation" (p. 102). Later in this chapter on the foundation of Gethsemani, Merton writes that the trials endured by the Trappists were evidence of how much the devil fights against contemplative monasteries and how much the brothers needed to remain true to their vocation and to each other; the pressure to succumb to activity and to the innumerable trials were something to be expected but to be valiantly fought.

In a final example, the monastery of Our Lady of the Valley in Rhode Island had no vocations when they believed material success prior to their contemplative vocation: "The reason they had no novices was precisely that they were not truly contemplatives . . . they could not give themselves entire to the life of prayer that was required of them" (p.180). However, when Dom John O'Connor rid the Trappists of care for their guest house, gave "the contemplative

element . . . the full attention it deserves in a contemplative monastery” (p. 181), and built a huge Gothic church, “the mysterious, vital force that attracts men of prayer to a center of the interior life made itself felt. Postulants came in greater and greater numbers to devote themselves to God” (p. 181). This monastery also succeeded in living this lifestyle to its height in the United States.

To see this lesson borne out in so many instances in this book was for Merton and for us a real call to understand that the contemplative vocation is one that must be selected, guarded, and lived.

Literary Prose in the History Text

Thomas Merton presents vignettes of saintly Cistercian characters that make this history a work of literature.

One Trappist put forth for canonization, Father Joseph Cassant, is a particularly endearing character for his lack of gifts: this Trappist with both weak mind and body achieved such perfection because of the ability to direct his will toward loving God and to accepting God’s will. Merton writes,

it is a tribute both to the clear-sightedness of the director and to the docility of the penitent that Father Joseph was able to recognize the biggest obstacle to his sanctity in what we, today, would call an “inferiority complex.” He was keenly sensitive of his lack of gifts; but the supernatural realism of his interior life made him able to see, when it was pointed out to him, that this was precisely the providential tool with which God intended him to forge his sanctity. (p. 319)

Accepting his limitations and eschewing the compensation of great asceticism, Father Joseph was able to forge his own true self and vocation. Love triumphed in the life of this simple but strong-willed man and his contemplative vocation was deeply fulfilled.

Merton writes of a blacksmith who had a deep gift of contemplative prayer:

The novices who were sent to him to be trained at shoeing horses had to be content with absolute silence. Ordinarily, in a case like that, permission to talk was allowed, but Brother Abel believed in the rule of silence, and the novices had to do their best to pick up his system of signs. He worked with a rosary in one hand and a hammer in the other . . . He was happiest when the bell for the end of work called him back from the smithy to the monastery. There, he would wash up and swing his brown cloak over his shoulders and go to kneel down in the quiet church. He would turn his swarthy, bearded face toward the tabernacle and sink into a deep absorption that held him there, motionless, during practically all his free time. This muscular and practical man, skilled in his craft and one of the best workers in the monastery, had the gift of deep contemplation. (p. 312)

Brother Abel died in prayer, while kneeling, on the feast of all saints in 1879. Merton’s literary talents enable us, like himself, to imagine what kind of inner life this person lived and to emulate it. It is his imagination of these characters that makes this book come alive.

Although there are many other caricatures — such as those of Frater Frederic (p. 208), Father Pio Heredia (p. 214), Dom Frederick Dunne (p. 228), and Mother Mary Berchmans (p. 326) — possibly the most poignant is that of Frater Maxime who fought in the first world war. Having left a diary of his spiritual life, Frater Maxime is described by

Merton as having “entered upon the ways of infused prayer; he had been drawn into the close and intimate control of the Holy Spirit and was now in the strict sense a contemplative” (p. 194). The lot of Frater Maxime was indeed one of the most difficult: he was a soldier forced to serve literally outside in the woods surrounding his beloved monastery. He had hoped, he wrote in his journal, “to end my days” there and “remained with my eyes fixed upon the abbey” (p. 196). Merton’s prose itself is moving:

One would think it rather unkind of God to drive home His hard demand with such obvious bluntness: but Maxime Carlier was able to understand what it was all about. This was his sacrifice. It was the greatest thing he had to give: the security of his monastery, his very vocation itself and even his hopes of becoming a saint as a contemplative monk. But these are precisely the things that God demands in sacrifice from the ones whom He means to lead to perfection by the contemplative road. They have to be ready to suffer with equanimity the terrifying loss of all that seems to constitute the indispensable means to perfection, and let God alone lead them, in darkness and emptiness, to their end. (pp. 196-197)

Merton says Frater Maxime’s secret was “his faith in the presence of God” (p. 198). His Cistercian spirit, for which obedience and the presence of God were the two foundations, did not cower under the demands made on it during the war. In celebrating a character like Frater Maxime, Merton illustrates that a true contemplative can withstand any kind of situation provided he or she is formed, meaning that the contemplative vocation is foremost in the person’s life and outlook.

Conclusion

A regular history of an order might concentrate on the dates, the major trends, the founding persons. Merton makes his into a literary lesson for contemplatives. In so doing, he reveals his own achievement in a short time of an advanced spiritual state and his grasp of how important the lessons he saw were. This may have been, without anyone’s admitting it, the text by which Merton made himself at home in the monastery rather than the exhausting task it can be made out to be.