

Literary Merton: Joyce, Aesthetics and Contemplation

Review of

“All the Living and the Dead”: The Literature of James Joyce

By Thomas Merton [3 CDs]

Introduction by Michael W. Higgins

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Reviewed by **Patrick Thomas Morgan**

“I think you need to know a little bit about James Joyce,” says Thomas Merton. “Joyce, better than anyone else, expressed the consciousness of Western man pre-World War I and pre-World War II.” Four months before Merton died, he gave a series of four lectures to the monastic community at the Abbey of the Gethsemani, introducing them to the life and works of James Augustine Aloysius Joyce, author of such acclaimed works as *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. In these illuminating lectures, Merton goes beyond biographical criticism and literary close readings to share with us the spiritual insights and intellectual intensities that leap from the page when one radical Catholic reads another.

To call Joyce a radical *Catholic* may seem like a naïve revisionist history bordering on flippancy, and yet Merton makes a solid case, excavating a Joyce who “remained true,” says Merton, “to the deepest values of Catholicism.” While acknowledging the traditional scandal Catholics – especially Irish Catholics – associate with a writer who famously gave up Catholicism, Merton nevertheless recognizes a deeply Catholic aesthetic of creativity and freedom in the writings of James Joyce. Joyce didn’t reject Catholicism, says Merton; he rejected a *shallow* form of Catholicism, sublimating what might have been a priestly vocation into the vocation of an artist. “He was so deep,” says Merton, “that he saw in an obscure way that their Catholicism was superficial.”

After an expertly contextualized introduction by Merton scholar and author Michael Higgins, Merton takes the stage, leading us through a series of tangent-laced reflections mostly focused on Joyce’s collection of short stories entitled *Dubliners*. The first lecture by Merton covers such topics as the value of literature in theology and the spiritual life, Joyce’s Catholicism, the modern Joyce literary critical industry and the genre of comedy. In the second lecture, Merton provides an insightful reading of Joyce’s short story “The Dead,” using Keats’s concept of negative capability, and contrasting – often humorously – Merton’s idea of good criticism with what he considers to be insufficient literary criticism.

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The third lecture covers the relation between aesthetics and contemplation, unpacking Joyce's use of the term "epiphanies." The final lecture is divided into two conceptual sections: the first section – tangential to the entire theme of the series – is about Merton's vision for the future of monasticism, while the second section covers Joyce's writing process and the short story "Araby," long passages of which Merton reads with panache. Aside from the unrelated topic of monasticism's future, Merton covers several subject areas that may not be readily expected by someone unfamiliar with Merton's discursive style: such topics include psychoanalysis, Buddhism, advertising art and nuclear warfare, all of which were common topics in Merton's writing from that period.

More revealing than a catalogue of lecture topics, though, may be a listing of some of the fundamental and problematic questions on which Merton shares his insights. What is the value of literary criticism in theology? How should we approach a literary text that clashes with our beliefs? What is the most effective way for a monk – or anyone interested in spiritual insights – to read literature? What constitutes a great writer? What are the ingredients for creating an authentic genre of comedy? Who are the two English Catholic writers who have created what Merton calls "the two great philosophies of art"? What are the four possible scenarios for the future of monastic spirituality? Merton reflects on these questions and more, interlacing the personal anecdotes, colloquial comments and humorous connections that made him such a magnetic figure.

As many reviewers of Merton's conferences have noted, there is so much more to these lectures than the nominal content and so many different ways to listen to Merton's words. For example, you can listen to uncover Merton the man – that is, the Merton who is always in the process of becoming. In the lectures, for instance, this sense of Merton the man shines through when he admits that he is sometimes overly harsh in his criticism of Protestantism. "I don't want to appear to make fun of it because I don't like it," says Merton. "It's OK for some people." You can listen by imagining yourself in Merton's classroom, responding to the in-the-moment questions he raises, oftentimes to elicit a specific answer – and particular word – that none of the novices achieve. "Who are the five great comic geniuses?" he asks, to which the novices throw out a catalogue of names ranging from Chesterton ("No," responds Merton) to Shakespeare ("Shakespeare is among them," he says) to Chaplin, a suggestion Merton finds quite amusing. You can listen for Merton's flexible humor, such as when, after an odd noise interrupts the middle of a lecture, Merton and his audience burst out laughing: "We have to contend with the spirits of the dead! This is the ghost of some Irish banshee," he playfully says. You can listen for those verbal gems that smack you in the face and make you pause and contemplate. Such a gem for me was: "Contemplation does not mean prescinding from present material reality for some other reality – there's only one reality: here it is, see. Contemplation means penetrating the only reality you've got: it's not material, but it's in matter."

Some of my favorite lecture moments include the extraneous sounds and words – those interstitial moments in which Merton's Abbey of Gethsemani becomes real for us. At one moment, in between words, I could hear the abbey's bells resounding in the air. At another moment, I could make out a few trills of birdsong from outside, presumably, the classroom's window. There are the pre-lecture words that conjure up a sense of the monastic community beyond the confines of this CD's memory. And there are the timed abbey chimes that signal to Merton, the monks and us that our lecture is at a close. As someone who never met Thomas Merton in person, I was therefore all the more appreciative when he said aloud the names of Brother Paul and Father John Eudes, two monks *I have* had the privilege to meet. All these seemingly ancillary sounds and side comments combine to create a sense of connection with Merton that adds a rich, resonating dimension to the textual Merton we all know and love.

Another interstitial moment I've learned to treasure is when Merton descends from the reified and impossible images of him that are, at times, easy to create from his textual persona. When listening to him speak, it's hard not to notice, for example, his linguistic twitches, verbal tics including such words as "so" and "you know." Merton's most common verbal tic is "see." Although Merton's overuse of "see" can be distracting at times, I would like to suggest that it also lends insight into the way Merton experiences and represents the world – the way he connects with others through his spoken language. Sight, seeing and images represent an important means by which Merton frames his reality. Let us not forget that Merton is the poet of the striking image, an epithet he has implicitly garnered since the earliest reviews of his poetry. He is the poet of the imagistic phrase, which rises out of the text and into our minds. As Robert Speaight observes (a comment with which we are free to disagree) in his Foreword to Merton's *Selected Poems*, published in London in 1950: "Merton has a more certain power over the single phrase than the sustaining rhythm" (xii). His verbal tic, "see," can be figured as another manifestation of Merton's predilection for images, metaphors, sights and seeing – an expression of his deep commitment to visuality. At the very least, though, these tics are humanizing moments, reminding us that, yes, even Thomas Merton had his semantic crutches.

In his introduction to the conferences, Michael Higgins provides an astute and nicely distilled history of Joyce's influence on Merton, while also characterizing the main structural points of the lectures. For example, Higgins points out how "Joyce influenced Merton in three fundamental ways": 1) as a writer, informing Merton's literary style; 2) in his aesthetics, or how Merton understood and thought about art; and 3) as a Catholic rebel. Because his focus is on connecting Merton with Joyce, Higgins sometimes, understandably, has to refrain from mentioning other texts by Merton that can act as companion reading for these lectures. Merton's views on aesthetics and contemplation within the lectures, for instance, are thumbnail versions of his essay, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," which was a revision of the earlier essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life." For anyone interested in a more fleshed-out version of the personal aesthetics Merton is drawing upon, I recommend re-reading these two essays.

In Merton's first lecture, he provides a cogent argument for why literary criticism is important for anyone who wants to grow as a reader of the Bible. "Since the Bible is literature," says Merton, "it's useful to read a little literature once in a while to keep attuned to what kind of thing the Bible is. God revealed himself and showed us how he judges things in various literary genres. . . . God chose literature rather than professional theology as the road of revelation of himself." This entire lecture is full of such insightful gems, as Merton moves from theology and literature to an introduction of James Joyce, his works, his literary reception and his relation to Catholicism.

"Some of these short stories are absolute masterpieces – I'm not sure if I can get that across here," says Merton in the first lecture. I'm happy to say that, in the second lecture, in which he dives into "The Dead," Merton proves himself wrong. In this conference Merton provides insight into his views on what constitutes effective and ineffective literary criticism. "Good critics . . . can handle the material the way Joyce himself did," says Merton. "They live with it, move with it, sort of function with it. And leave it be." In contrast, "bad critics" try to construct an all-knowing key – a system – that claims to unlock all the secrets of Joyce's text. For much of this lecture, Merton revolves between reading sections of the "The Dead" and adding his insightful comments, such as the way the story creates a tension between superficial happiness and inner emptiness.

In Merton's third lecture, he focuses on the relation between contemplation and aesthetics, unpacking some of Joyce's aesthetics: epiphanies, Classicism vs. Romanticism, kinetic aesthetics vs.

static aesthetics, and the fundamentals of the comic genre. As I have been trying to do in this review, though, I'll let Merton speak for himself. He characterizes the aesthetic experience, for example, as "experience plus," adding: "What is real in life is not puttable into a guidebook. It is this plus that is always the superabundance of something that you can't explain and can't understand – which underlies all real valid experiences and all life."

Merton's fourth lecture may at first appear as if it were mistitled on the CD: "Spiritual Seeing: 'Araby.'" Instead of immediately plunging into Joyce's short story, though, Merton begins by explaining his vision for the future of monastic spirituality. Specifically, he describes four scenarios outlining the directions in which monasticism can grow: 1) the medieval Catholic Cistercian tradition; 2) Pentecostal communities; 3) Eastern Orthodox monasticism; and 4) Zen Buddhism. "It isn't about which is best and right," says Merton, "but what fits you." But after this foray into monastic futures, Merton does turn back to Joyce, starting with a concrete definition of what Joyce means by "epiphanies": "they are revelations of concrete reality worked over by the artist as artist." Merton uses the concept of epiphanies to juxtapose two approaches to life: the conventional, knee-jerk reaction to events versus the grasping of inner meaning – of recognizing the presence of God. After briefly covering how Joyce is viewed in Dublin and sketching Joyce's methods for gathering fragments of life in his writing journals, Merton then reads and unpacks Joyce's short story "Araby." Oscillating between reading the text and sharing his analysis, Merton distills the story into a spiritual insight. Personally, my favorite part within this last lecture is the way Merton embodies the story so thoroughly that, towards the end, he actually modulates his voice to mimic the characters.

These lectures represent Thomas Merton at his best: insightfully interpreting stories we *thought* we knew, as we realize – through Merton's eyes – that there's a dimension to these stories only Merton can reveal. The two main criticisms about this CD set are of no fault of Merton's. One possible criticism regards false (or at least deceptive) advertisement: the box set advertises the following: "Introduction by Dr. Michael W. Higgins, Ph.D.," followed immediately by "5 Lectures on 3 CDs." The frontal advertisement thus implicitly suggests that there is an introduction by Michael Higgins followed by *five* lectures by Merton. It is only on the back of the case that we realize that the introduction is being treated as one of these five lectures, and that there are really only four Merton lectures. Another possible criticism is how the last lecture includes enough non-Joycean material to at least garner *some* indication of that fact on the box set. (It remains unacknowledged.) We shouldn't fault Merton for his discursive style, though, because we need to keep in mind that his ultimate goal isn't to produce four focused lectures about Joyce, made-to-order for public consumption; his goal is to form the inner reality and spiritual dimensions of these monks, which means Joyce sometimes takes a back seat in these lectures. It's Now You Know Media, Inc. that is packaging Merton as if he were giving nicely discrete, consumable and focused lectures on James Joyce.

But these minor oversights fade into nothing in comparison to the scintillating brilliance of these lectures – lectures that nevertheless contain an elegiac quality for contemporary listeners. We realize that this Thomas Merton of July and August of 1968 – the Thomas Merton who is full of life, who is sharing his exuberance about Joyce, who is at the top of his intellectual and spiritual game – is about to leave for Bangkok, where he will leave the world forever. This disturbing knowledge lends a poignancy to some of Merton's words which I'll leave you to contemplate: "From now on until the end of the world [Merton laughs] – or till as long as I am in the world – anytime I talk about monastic possibilities, none of it assumes that it's going to be done by more than five people, see."