

Lively Look at a Storied Life

Review of

Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, and the Rest of the Story

By Michael W. Higgins [12 lectures on 4 DVDs / 4 CDs]

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Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Now You Know Media is creating a whole new “cottage industry” of Mertoniana, most of it useful for people intent on knowing more about Thomas Merton or deepening their own prayer lives. This latest set of lectures by Michael Higgins, well-known Merton scholar and current vice president of the International Thomas Merton Society, creates a non-threatening course for both the newcomer to Merton and the seasoned reader of Merton looking for nuances in his writing. These lectures are of particular worth because they blend Higgins’ pedagogical charisma with his long-standing knowledge of Merton. The set is divided into twelve thirty-minute lectures, focusing on individual works by Merton. The reader will notice that all these texts are autobiographical in nature and represent a repository of Merton thinking and Merton evolving. Higgins is not so much interested in the literary structure of each published text as he is in the themes and concepts that occupy Merton’s attention and that reveal his maturing sense of vocation. Quoting extensively from his own biography of Merton, *Heretic Blood* (Stoddart, 1998), which is organized around William Blake’s notion of the Four Zoas, Higgins offers us a new and perceptive view of Thomas Merton.

Here’s a brief overview of what to expect from these lectures. Topic #1 is an introduction to Merton, setting the biographical context and the centrality of William Blake to Merton’s thinking. Topic #2, *The Secular Journal*, positions Merton, prior to his entrance into the monastery, as discovering his poetic voice and the language of the visionary, and focusing on three geographies: Perry Street, Cuba and St. Bonaventure. Topic #3 is Part I of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, providing the genesis of the book, its “cinematic technique,” and the responses of various critics; topic #4, also on *The Seven Storey Mountain*, examines its impact on society, the influence of Blake, the presence of the Fathers of the Church, Merton’s conversion, his entrance into the Trappists and the death of his brother, John Paul. In Topic #5, *The Sign of Jonas*, Higgins notes that this journal is kept while Merton is writing his autobiography, and that with “disciplined spontaneity” it reveals (by Higgins’

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count) nine masks of Merton such as the rebel, the visionary, the artist, the dutiful monk, etc. Topic #6 discusses *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, according to Higgins Merton's most successful journal, that critiques technology-totalism-totalitarianism that gave rise to Eichmann, our failure to see and understand *le point vierge* and paradise all around us, and a false monasticism that has become encased in a medieval worldview. I found Topic #7, *A Vow of Conversation*, to be a somewhat confusing lecture that purports to focus on Merton's need for "self-revision," his dislike of European intellectuals, the importance of negating illusion and his response to the biography of Simone Weil. Topic #8, the Journals of New Mexico, Alaska and Asia, highlights these landscapes as potential locations for a hermitage, as well as Merton's need for "time to settle in the heart" and bring back to his readers a wider sense of Church. Topic #9 focuses on *The Asian Journal*, which is unpolished and fragmentary but represents for Higgins "the monastic charism fully realized," as well as the belief that everything that is holy comes together in a final integration. Topic #10, "The Restricted Journals," focuses almost solely on Volume Six of the journals and Merton's dishonesty and "immense reservoir of anguish" over his relationship with "M." Topic #11, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, is a refreshing look at this posthumously published macaronic journal as "autobiographical fiction," oozing (in Higgins's word) with contempt for society, making amends for leaving the continent and ironically creating an apologia for monasticism. Topic #12, "The Seven Storey Mountain Revisited" looks primarily at three Merton poems ("A Letter to My Friends," "The Biography" and "On the Anniversary of My Baptism") as tracing in poetry the narrative of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and showing Merton as a pilgrim capable of mystical and theological reflection.

The viewer of the DVD version can enjoy Professor Higgins in action with gestures, carefully documented quotations and references. The viewer is not subjected to merely a "talking head" because interspersed are appropriate photos of Merton at different stages of his life (although some are repeated a bit too often) and scenery to support the commentary (for example World-War-II images to reinforce the drama of Eichmann in Topic #6; seascapes to accompany the third poem in Topic #12). And, of course, the listener of the CD (and viewer of the DVD) is treated to Higgins's clever turns of phrase and piercing insights. With rhetorical flair, he demonstrates his preference for the Miltonic double negative. In Topic #6, for example, we hear that Merton is "not unconscious, not unaware of" – meaning he definitely is conscious and aware of . . . And Higgins often explicates an idea with energetic triplets. For example, talking about Merton's fascination with Alaska and the possibilities of a deeper solitude that the geography offers, Higgins says: "Merton needs to be attentive to new life, to find new ways of being that old monk, new ways of vivifying not only himself, but also monasticism."

This set of twelve lectures comes with a Study Guide on a separate disk that provides for each topic a context, an overview of the major points, and three questions for discussion (only two questions for Topic #12). There is also on the first disk a six-minute interview with Higgins that offers informal comments about the project and the importance of Merton for contemporary audiences. These Merton lectures are a valuable contribution to Merton studies and provide a key to understanding many of his autobiographical texts. Although pricey, they would be a valuable resource for libraries and/or ITMS Chapters to purchase.