A CRITICAL PERIOD IN MERTON'S LIFE

Review of

Thomas Merton
A VOW OF CONVERSATION: JOURNALS, 1964-1965
Edited with a Preface by Naomi Burton Stone
New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988
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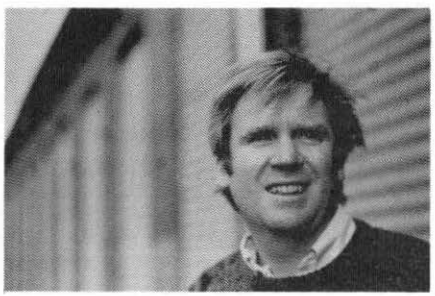
Reviewed by **James T. Fisher**

In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* biographer Michael Mott wrote: "While making final corrections for *The Secular Journal* Merton admits what had taken him so long, either to discover or to accept: 'Galley proofs of *Secular Journal* make it clear to me that my best writing has always been in Journals and such things — notebooks.' " The publication of *A Vow of Conversation* provides yet another glimpse of Merton writing in the informal, introspective mode familiar to readers of *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and others of his edited journals.

A Vow of Conversation — which Merton reworked in 1968 in hopes of seeing the work published in 1971 — draws upon journal entries from a particularly critical period in Merton's life, as his longstanding request to become a full-time hermit would finally be granted in August, 1965. By 1964 Merton was convinced that the eremitic life was essential to the pursuit of his true nature. Reflections on solitude thus comprise a central theme of the book. "There is no question, once again," he wrote on 22 September that year, "that I am only fully normal and human when I am alone, but I live according to a different and more real tempo. I live with the tempo of the sun and of the day, in complete harmony with what is all around me."

Yet Merton's solitary vocation was as complex and paradoxical as the rest of his life. As Naomi Burton Stone, who edited the journals, writes in her preface to *A Vow of Conversation*: "There's no doubt that the title of this book is a play on words." For Merton was well aware of the dangers of a "constructed solitude, which is actually the chief obstacle to the realization of true solitude in openness and inner subjectivity." He struggled to transcend the "illusion" of "wanting to be something of



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which I have formed a concept." Merton had come a long way from the world-denying Roman Catholic triumphalism of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He now hoped somehow to grow in love and compassion for the world by "conversing" with it from the rich depths of his experience at the hermitage.

The permission to become a hermit climaxed a long struggle with Cistercian authorities, particularly with Dom James Fox, the Abbot of Gethsemani during most of Merton's career there. *A Vow of Conversation* reveals some of Merton's resentment against the Abbot for prohibiting him from traveling. Merton obviously felt he deserved special treatment from the Order, a not wholly unreasonable sentiment considering the magnitude of his contributions. Yet *A Vow of Conversation* lends credence to those who would claim the conflict was more than a struggle of the brilliant, free-spirited mystic against a rigid monastic authority. When, in the autumn of 1964, Dom James turned to Merton for advice on establishing a number of hermitages on newly-acquired land, Merton recoiled from the Abbot's "sweeping and at times almost inhuman bursts of idealism." Merton had constructed a melodrama surrounding the obedience dilemma: now the sudden likelihood of greater freedom became the source of a creative tension which pervades this book.

Merton continued to receive visitors during this period as he would after becoming a fulltime hermit. *A Vow of Conversation* reveals the fully ecumenical range of his interests and friendships, from commentaries on Sartre and Bonhoeffer to accounts of meetings with Abraham Joshua Heschel, Southern Baptist seminarians, and members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation invited to Gethsemani by Merton for a retreat in November of 1964. He also obtained permission in June of that year to meet in New York with D. T. Suzuki, the elderly Buddhist whose writings on Zen were so significant to Merton and many others in the West., Along with being encouraged by "the deep understanding between myself and this extraordinary and simple man," Merton renewed his love affair with the city itself in language which showed how far he had traveled since the late 1940s: "A city with substance and scale . . . anything but soul-less. New York is feminine. It is she, the city. I am faithful to her."

A Vow of Conversation shows Merton at his most human: as often indecisive, occasionally cranky (true to his early vocation as an aesthete in the New Criticism tradition, he continued to condemn the consumer culture of American democracy as "total barbarity!"), but above all as dedicated to a personal quest of self-discovery to which he zealously clung. Merton has often been credited as being far in advance of other Christians on both spiritual and social issues, but this book confirms instead his stature as a profoundly representative figure at a certain moment in the history of American Catholicism. He was far from alone in his concerns for world peace or his pursuit of Asian wisdom. Like many others he resented dogmatic authority (including the censorship which ensured that works like this could not be read at a time of great need) while continuing to depend upon an identity sanctioned by his Church. Recognizing that radical freedom posed as great a threat as it did a promise, Merton learned to appreciate the existential drama in each fragment of awareness, and in doing so offered a model of creative fidelity which continues to inspire us.