

Book Reviews

A mirror of my own character and conscience

A review of the first two volumes of the complete journals of Thomas Merton by Paul Pearson.

Thomas Merton. *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*. Ed. with Introduction by Patrick Hart, OCSO (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) pp.478, £16.99. ISBN 0-06-065474-0.

Thomas Merton. *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*. Ed. with Introduction by Jonathan Montaldo. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) pp.501, £18.99. ISBN 0-06-0654776-7

In 1967 Thomas Merton organised the setting up of a Legacy Trust to look after his literary estate after his death. In that Trust Merton stipulated that "Journals and Personal Notes, or any notes marked 'private' or 'not for publication,' are to be kept unpublished for at least twenty-five years after my death." (*The Road to Joy*, 301.) As the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death approached, his Trustees, Tommie O'Callaghan, Robert Giroux and James Laughlin, asked Brother Patrick Hart of the Abbey of Gethsemani to be the general editor of these journals. It was proposed that these journals be published in seven volumes with the first and last edited by Brother Patrick and the others edited by Jonathan Montaldo, Laurence Cunningham, Victor Kramer, Robert Daggy, and Christine Bochen respectively.

The first volume, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, was published in time for the fourth general meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society held at St Bonaventure's University, Olean in June 1995. This was a timely publication as much of this volume was originally penned at Olean when Merton was teaching there in 1940 and 1941. Volume Two, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo, appeared in the autumn of 1995 with the publishers intending the remaining volumes to be published at roughly six monthly intervals with Volume Seven appearing in the spring of 1998.

In approaching these journals it is important to understand them within their literary context. The decision was made early on that Merton's

journals should be published in their entirety, a decision all scholars in the Merton world must be grateful for. The great majority of 'Merton aficionados' will also be grateful for this decision. Having said that I am sure some people may find these journals petty, tedious and boring, expecting either the fine style of the journals Merton himself chose to publish in his own lifetime, with which we are so familiar, or new and stunning revelations about Merton. Publishing these journals in their entirety allows us to see Merton more clearly, going behind the entries he chose to share in his lifetime and meeting this inveterate diarist and spiritual master on a more everyday level than it has been possible to do in his other published work. The reader will not find here any new revelations not already covered in the major biographies of Merton already published. Instead readers will be able to approach Merton from their own perspective and form their own impressions of him, encountering the multi-faceted nature of the man, a nature no biographer can fully capture.

At the fourth general meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, Michael Mott, in his keynote address, spoke of his understanding of Merton's time at Olean, describing it as a period of formation for the remainder of Merton's life, a kind of hidden period, comparing it to the important formative period in Isaac Newton's life when Cambridge University was closed due to the plague and Newton worked out the foundations for his life's work at the family farm of Woolsthorpe. At Olean Merton, though a very gifted teacher, made little impression on the students he was teaching. His energies were focused instead on his inner life and the changes taking place within him, changes we see recorded in *Run to the Mountain*.

Run to the Mountain covers the same period as *A Secular Journal*, from May 1939 until December 1941, just a few days before Merton entered Gethsemani. Although all of *A Secular Journal* is incorporated into *Run to the Mountain* the vast amount of material new to the reader in this volume means that for most of the time the reader will be exploring a vast new territory. Central to *Run to the Mountain* is Merton's developing sense of vocation as, after coming to terms with his rejection by the Franciscans and his attempt to live a religious life 'in the world,' his desire to become a Trappist grows and develops.

Alongside Merton's religious vocation, his vocation as a writer is also central to this journal, which is, in itself, a witness to this side of Merton's vocation. This book is a writer's journal as Merton records his various attempts to have his work published, the new writing he is undertaking, including his

attempts at experimental writing, and the writers he himself is reading. We see him working through his reasons for writing, especially his reasons for keeping a journal, stating early on that "one point of this new book is to get things down in writing because they look different on paper than inside your head" (p.17) and we also see Merton beginning to discover an almost compulsive need to write autobiography, describing how he is preoccupied "with whatever it is going on inside my own heart, and I simply can't write about anything else." (p.118)

Run to the Mountain provides the reader with access to areas of Merton's life and thought which were not part of the picture he wished to present to the readers of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or *A Secular Journal*, especially Merton's searching, questioning spirit. Many issues which Merton avoided mentioning in his early published journals, but which surfaced again in his later writings from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* onwards, can be seen in *Run to the Mountain* in embryonic form. This can be seen in Merton's attitude to the world in this journal where he is less negative about the world than in his autobiography and struggles with his relationship to it suggesting at one point "to do anything good in the world, you have to renounce the world in order to do that thing: you have to love it and give it your whole life." (p.419) Similarly many of the paradoxes of Merton's own life can be found in this book, most notably his complaints about noise and his desire for silence whilst, at the same time, writing frantically. A part of Merton's writing in this journal which I found particularly striking was a fondness he had for making lists in his journal - lists of "illuminating thoughts," (p.312) "new words," (p.23) arguments, and a list entitled "where was I this time last year, two years ago, etc. etc..." (p.369). Lists like these can at time be noisy and distracting, but it is also possible to see in them elements and patterns of thinking which Merton would later incorporate into his anti-poetry.

The second volume of Merton's complete journals, *Entering the Silence* is a complete contrast to Volume One. The major part of this journal begins on the fifth anniversary of his entry to Gethsemani, December 10, 1946, just after he had sent the manuscript of his autobiography to his literary agent, and concludes in July 1952. Besides this long section of journal entries *Entering the Silence* also contains all that remains of a journal Merton kept during his novitiate, just fourteen hand-written pages covering December 1941 to April 1942, as well as some reflections of Merton's on Dom Frederic Dunne, the

abbot who received him into the community at Gethsemani and encouraged him to write *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

In 1950 Merton mentions in a letter to his literary agent that he is typing up sections from a journal which he had been keeping and had tentatively entitled it "The Whale and the Ivy." Merton's journal entries from December 1946 until July 1952 in *Entering the Silence* make up that journal and have been given their original title in this volume. Readers familiar with Merton's first published monastic journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, will recognise two things here. Firstly the dates of these entries correspond with entries in *The Sign of Jonas*, and secondly, the title "The Whale and the Ivy" was a title Merton used for a section of *Jonas*. Having said that I think it is important to stress right away that *Entering the Silence* is not simply a reissue of *The Sign of Jonas* with a few extra passages included. In fact less than half of the material in this journal was included in *The Sign of Jonas*. The mixture this journal contains of very familiar passages from *Jonas* along with totally new material makes it a very refreshing read. The reader can feel that they are revisiting an old familiar haunt and yet, at the same time, discovering certain areas for the first time.

Entering the Silence lacks the careful structure that Merton gave to *The Sign of Jonas* or to other journals which he himself prepared for publication. The central themes of *Jonas* are certainly present in this journal but, without the structure Merton imposed, especially his introductions to each chapter, they are not so prominent and, as was the case with *Rum to the Mountain*, this allows other themes to emerge. Merton's struggles over his vocations to solitude and to writing are still clearly evident but within a broader context, not seen in *Jonas*, they are less striking. In *Entering the Silence* Merton's comments on his natural surroundings are more frequent than in *Jonas* where his growing awareness of nature appeared to happen very gradually over the course of that journal and other later journals. Similarly, Merton's understanding of his place in the world is much clearer than he would have us understand in *Jonas* stating quite clearly in June 1947 that "I am here for others, not only for myself" (p.84) and, later on, how "we cannot be saints unless we are first of all human." (p.451)

In comparing *Entering the Silence* and *The Sign of Jonas* we can see both Merton the literary craftsman and Merton the censor at work. By the end of *Jonas* Merton appears to have come to terms with his vocation as a writer, discovering that writing also gave him some of the solitude he was so desperately seeking. In *Entering the Silence* Merton's compulsive need to write is also evident, especially his need to write about himself discovering that "every

book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience." (p.287) We also see Merton at work deciding both what to write (p.126) and what to type up in preparation for publication. (p.434) As Merton's remaining journals are published a most fascinating study would be to carefully compare his unedited journals with those parts he chose to publish thus providing an insight into the private and public Merton.

Merton's sense of humour is more evident in *Entering the Silence* than in *Jonas*. Readers acquainted with recordings of Merton's lectures in the sixties will already be familiar with this or with accounts of it given in reminiscences written by those who knew him. In *Entering the Silence* we can see a number of times where Merton turns his wry sense of humour upon himself. In writing of his book of poems *Figures for an Apocalypse* he remarks, "may God have mercy on me. The reviewers won't" (p.179) and, in one acutely self-aware passage Merton writes "I can't give up writing, and everywhere I turn I find the stuff I write is sticking to me like fly-paper, and the gramophone inside me is playing that same old tune 'Admiration, admiration - You are my ideal - you are the one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world.'" (p.64) Ten years later when Gregory Zilboorg accused Merton of wanting "a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'Hermit'". (Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. p.297) he was not saying anything Merton did not already know.

I am sure that everyone who reads these journals will come away with fresh and new insights into Thomas Merton. They will discover previously hidden facets of this multi-faceted man and no two experiences of the Merton to be found in these journals will be the same as through these pages Merton continues to speak to each one individually. The first two volumes of Merton's journals have served to whet my appetite for the remaining volumes, the publication of which, I, like many others I am sure, now eagerly await.