

visitation about 'his growing dissatisfaction with the businesslike atmosphere ... where work with machines was taking a central place, leaving monks with less and less time for reading and contemplation.'

Merton's work was writing, and he felt overworked. But the work itself was highly unusual in a Trappist monastery. As Waugh put it (though not to Merton): 'I don't think it possible to combine a Trappist's life with that of a professional writer. Cheese and liqueurs are the proper products of the contemplative life.' But it was not just that Merton had become a professional writer - he had become a religious and literary celebrity. What Waugh should have said was that it is not possible to be a celebrity and also to be a Trappist monk. A spiritually wiser abbot, less driven by the need to raise money, far from urging Merton to write would surely have told the young monk that *The Seven Storey Mountain* had been of great apologetic value but that it was now time to devote himself to becoming a contemplative monk whose manual work would attract no publicity and would not be distracting and stressful in the way that intellectual and literary work was bound to be.

The problem was that the monastery wanted the huge royalties Merton was bringing in, while at the same time the paradox of being an enclosed Trappist monk as well as a prolific author of best-selling books was central to Merton's fame and celebrity. Both monastery and monk needed the other - but not quite for the right reasons. What in the end would have become of this essentially unhealthy relationship we shall never know as Merton died in an accident at the early age of 53.

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Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence

Donald Grayston

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The discovery by Donald Grayston in the summer of 2008 of the forgotten correspondence between, primarily, Thomas Merton and Anselmo Giabbani in the years 1952-1956 can be read and studied at a variety of levels. There is, at the simplest and most elementary level, the struggle of

Merton to find his contemplative vocation in the Cistercian monastery of Gethsemani that had, in many ways, forfeited its contemplative heritage. The letters can be seen as a clash between a monk seeking greater vocational liberty and ecclesial authority - freedom versus order - Camaldoli versus Gethsemani. But if this is the only level at which the issue is approached, then the core of the dilemma will be missed.

The deeper essence of the issue, aptly captured by the book's title, was that, in many ways, Merton's struggle was far more complex; indeed it makes it both perennial and contemporary. What is the noonday demon that Merton and other desert mothers and fathers (and equally pertinent for our time-conscious spiritual seekers) must face and not flinch from? What does the metaphor of the noonday demon reveal to us and why is this angel of light such an alluring tempter for today? The honeymoon phase of the spiritual journey often begins with much hope and many possibilities, but the time comes when the deeper journey of transformation must be faced. Often such a place of transformation begins and ends by being grounded and rooted in a specific place and community - for Merton, of course, it was the monastery of Gethsemani. But, for many who are not monks and nuns, the lived reality can be family, community and parish life. Needless to say, such realities are imperfect and can become sites of frustration, irritation, betrayals, disappointments and strained relationships - this is where and when the noonday demon arrives. The tempter comes and suggests we go to a better place with more sensitive people, those more like ourselves. Our place of transformation is demonized and the other places, people and teachers are idealized and romanticized. The noonday demon, through a variety of hints and tantalizing whispers, also suggests we leave the very inner place where God is working in us to transform us. This inattentive and predictable tendency to flee from the inner and outer places where the process of deification can be done is the work of the noonday demon - all sorts of elevated promises offered if we but heed the tempter's sweet and alluring voice.

Merton had reached a place at Gethsemani after being there for ten years in which the glow and charm was gone - he was restless with the place. The 36 letters that Grayston includes in the book (pages 60-160) deal with all Merton's letters to, and responses from, different actors in this noonday demon drama. Grayston does a superb job of setting the dilemma and issue within a broad classical context, and in describing Merton's struggle with his own version of boredom, restlessness and an idealized other place. Merton's abbot, wisely so, saw the problem, an all too common monastic and human one, for what it was: the false notion that by leaving situation and place, the problem would be solved. Alas

this is itself the problem. We see this melodrama played out often today by the multiple spiritual butterflies that flit from church to church, conference to conference, book to book, spiritual director to spiritual director. Merton knew the temptation of the noonday demon who meets us, also, at various stages of the journey – this is why the vow of stability as a spiritual discipline, if not rightly understood or wisely heeded, can give way to the noonday demon.

It is significant to note that when Merton was in the midst of longing for a greater solitude than Gethsemani seemed to offer, he was, as the preface to *Thoughts in Solitude* vividly states, 'by the grace of God and the favor of his Superiors, able to enjoy special opportunities for solitude and meditation.' *Thoughts in Solitude*, written in 1953-1954, is the fruit of such freedom offered by Abbot James. There is, therefore, this tendency by Merton often to ignore what he had been given. In addition he sent mixed and conniving messages about his situation at Gethsemani to others. To Don Grayston's credit, as much as he admires Merton, he does not romanticise or approach Merton's life and writings in an uncritical manner.

Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon is a finely crafted tome. 'The Camaldoli Correspondence' is the obvious centerpiece of the book which has an informative introduction. A lengthy reflection on the subtler meaning and temptation of the noonday demon of *acedia* brings the book to a fine and fitting close. Grayston has obviously thought hard and wisely about the reality of the noonday demon in the classical tradition, Merton's journey, and our own confrontation with such a tempter. Merton remained at Gethsemani and, in doing so, was loyal to his vow of stability. Lesser pilgrims are taken in by the noonday demon and so never make much progress in the spiritual life. So they deny themselves its richest blessings for the simple reason that they are not willing to put in the work needed to attain its heights. Thankfully Merton did make the effort to stay the course. *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon* makes it abundantly clear just what sort of work and determination is necessary to resist the *acedia* of the noonday demon.

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