

CONFESSION AND CATHARSIS

Review of

THE HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE:

The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns

Selected & Edited by Willam H. Shannon

—Reviewed by **David D. Cooper**

In the past year, activity surrounding Thomas Merton as a certifiable public personality has been, to say the least, bullish. Rising interest in Merton-the-man has triggered a virtual tsunami of biographical studies, character sketches, reminiscences, and, least notably, popular treatments, packaged and pitched for mass consumption. A quick gloss of these latter items: a collection of Merton quotations for daily reflection, an illustrated gift book of Merton aphorisms with pithy commentary, even a one-actor bio-drama—complete with a scene of Merton pondering his own funeral—now available on video-cassette. Aside from the *kitsch* inevitably cranked out during an era of celebrity-making, a wealth of serious and work lasting has also appeared since last summer, the kind of work which will amply reward wide and enthusiastic interest in the character and personality of Merton. Michael Mott's award-winning encyclopedic biography holds its own on best seller lists. A smaller, less widely circulated fragment of John Howard Griffin's never-completed Merton biography has quickly become a collector's item. Paul Wilkes' film biography of Merton, first aired last June, has since been broadcast on all major PBS affiliates nationwide; Mr. Wilkes also edited a companion volume of reminiscences, transcribed from interviews with Merton's closest friends. And, last Fall, the Twayne Authors Series—generally regarded as the status underwriter for any modern writer—issued its critical biography, ably done by Victor Kramer. Clearly, Thomas Merton is “in.”

Consider the irony. A man who sought anonymity and shunned the public limelight and remained an outspoken critic of the American Cult of Personality becomes, in effect, one of its principal beneficiaries, accompanied at the trough of popular public interest by the likes of Lee Iacocca, Bette Davis, and the founder of McDonald's hamburger empire. I am not suggesting that the fine work being done on Merton in this idiom of image-making is either trivial, in and of itself, or trivializing to its subject. I do believe, however, that this continued inclination toward portraiture indicates that Merton studies has not yet emerged from what many Merton scholars see as its anecdotal phase, a phase best described by Robert Lowell forty years ago when he remarked that Merton's life seemed more interesting than his writings.

Recent developments may signal, however, that this phase is cresting and that Merton studies is reaching a crossroads of sorts. Despite persistent calls for the “monastic biography” of Merton, five biographical treatments in the past year alone may well be all the market can bear. Besides, Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* finally places restricted archival materials, hitherto unavailable to any scholar even willing to undertake archival-level research, into the public domain. Official biographies always dampen future speculations about the private lives of public figures, so there's good reason to expect that Professor Mott's benchmark study—sanctioned by its status as the “authorized” biography—will check the tendency toward continued biographical treatments of Merton.

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8 More important, efforts now underway to publish four volumes of Merton's selected letters, under the general editorship of the distinguished Merton scholar William H. Shannon, will further solidify the foundation of Merton studies. By making a vital primary resource accessible to a far broader base of future Merton scholars, the correspondence of Thomas Merton will round out, I believe, the initial phase of Merton scholarship. It is true that Merton's letters may only fuel further interest in the private thoughts of a public man, and thereby feed the sort of honorable public voyeurism that has nourished an era of biography-making in Merton studies. But only in the short term. The long term impact of the correspondence project will be far more significant as a catalyst for future scholarship, working eventually to defuse the mystique of Thomas Merton and quiet the speculation that has drawn so many writers to the flame of his personality alone. With the publication of Merton's letters—coupled with the invaluable resource of his official biography— Merton studies itself comes of age.

To announce a turning point as momentous as this may seem presumptuous or premature if not that letters and letter writing were so vital to Thomas Merton himself—vital to the evolution of his character and the development of his ideas, vital to the crucial re-tooling of the world-denying spirituality of his early monastic years into the mature humanism of his final decade, and vital, as well, to the unique process through which he gained influence and, ultimately, notoriety and fame. The first volume of Merton's selected letters—*The Hidden Ground of Love*, edited by Monsignor Shannon— is a vivid testament to just how important letters were to Merton. Unlike the published letters of so many modern writers, *The Hidden Ground of Love* can hardly be classified as ephemera. The intensity of purpose which underpins Merton's prodigious outpouring of letters hardly ever eases up throughout this 656 page collection of letters to a diverse group of sixty-five correspondents. These letters, in short, reveal the essential Merton. *The Hidden Ground of Love* may well deserve credit, then, as the most significant Merton publication since *The Asian Journal*. At the very least, the entire correspondence project will exert considerable influence on the future direction of Merton studies.

Merton acknowledged the importance of his own letter writing as early as 1956 when he began keeping carbon copies of his letters. From then on, letter writing became almost a daily routine until, by the time of his death, he had posted thousands of letters from Gethsemani and collected a room full of carbons. There is ample bibliographical evidence too that Merton became even further attracted to the idea of the letter as a literary form, as much a generic tool in his literary canon as an informal means of touching base with his friends. His way of separating form from function in his view of letter writing may in fact have justified his habit of circulating private correspondence publicly, without violating implied standards of intimacy among his individual correspondents. He did just that, often enough. Many of his



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Photo by William H. Shannon

correspondents surely must have realized that a private exchange of letters with Thomas Merton could never be entirely separate from public discourse.

For example, Merton selected and edited two editions of his letters as *The Cold War Letters*, widely circulated—in mimeograph—in 1962 and 1963. His “Letters in a Time of Crisis” were readily available to the public at-large in *Seeds of Destruction* the following year. Earlier, Merton had included a Pasternak letter as an Appendix to *Disputed Questions*. And later he took in hand a project to collect and edit a wild and hilarious exchange of letters with his good friend Robert Lax, posthumously published as *A Catch of Anti-Letters*. (Merton proposed to other correspondents that they publish their letters: when, in one case, he suggested such a project to Rosemary Ruether—he had in mind a magazine in England—she objected and wisely declined.) Elsewhere, Merton’s dialogue with D.T. Suzuki in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is essentially epistolary and owes much to their private exchange of letters. Many other items—including “Letters to a White Liberal,” “Letter to an Innocent Bystander,” “Message to Poets,” even *Cables to the Ace* and a sizable index of letters to editors—further indicate that Merton was the kind of writer who regularly capitalized on the intimacy and style of the epistolary form.

As William Shannon now points out in his introduction to *The Hidden Ground of Love*, letter writing served, perhaps first and foremost, a vital interpersonal function for Merton: “Merton’s life-style, to a large extent, denied him . . . friendship-building contacts. . . . Because he prized friendship so highly, he had no other choice: he *had* to write letters.” He frequently dashed off a half dozen letters a day—a fact in itself that resolves the mystique of paradox built up around the popular image of a self-styled recluse who nonetheless needed close personal friendships outside the confines of his solitude. Even from the relative isolation of his hermitage, letters enabled Merton to remain “more in communication,” he judged himself, “with people all over the place, all over the world, than most active lifers are.” He felt perfectly content to “stay in the bushes” only so long as he could continue to “make some sort of noises that will reach my offbeat friends.” It is not surprising, then, that the pace of Merton’s letter writing picked up after 1965, at the threshold of the so-called “hermitage years,” and that the quality of his interpersonal skills blossomed along with the quantity of letters he wrote. One of the most striking features of *The Hidden Ground of Love* is the range of those interpersonal talents. Whether writing to respond to a business matter or to counsel the troubled, these letters bear witness to Merton’s extraordinary capacity to merge, almost chameleon-like, into the personalities of his correspondents, cut through the awkward preliminaries of friendship-building, and enter into and sustain, genuine intimacy and mutual trust.

Letters also served a more pragmatic purpose as an important information resource, especially during the early 60’s when Merton’s interests—religious, intellectual, literary, political—quickly began to broaden well beyond the less worldly concerns of his earlier monastic years. Merton leaned heavily upon the expertise of his correspondents. And his correspondents, in return, were always eager to accommodate frequent requests for consignments of basic research material. That fund of essential information provided an indispensable resource—otherwise simply unavailable except through his correspondence—which contributed immeasurably to the ever-expanding range of Merton’s writing during the 60’s. I don’t have eyes and ears down here,” he admitted to one correspondent, so “others have to do my seeing for me.” *The Hidden Ground of Love* will remind us that a vast network of correspondents not only assisted Thomas Merton as informal reference librarians, but were instrumental forces in shaping the new directions of his thought during his influential final years. Contrary to the monolithic view of Merton’s development, his letters show that he did not evolve within the vacuum of his genius alone.

And as more information arrived, more new ideas departed from Gethsemani. As an adjunct to formal publication, Merton’s complex of correspondents provided him with a valuable, highly organized, and surprisingly successful means of further disseminating his writing. This was especially important when, in 1963, he was no longer permitted to publish any articles on the broad spectrum of peace issues stirring in the public debate. Letters were not subject to the ban imposed by his Superiors, so Merton quickly took up the slack by lobbying his causes through an even more determined letter writing campaign. He also continued to write essays which were mimeographed and then distributed

through his formidable network of correspondents who, in turn, distributed copies to a secondary contingent of friends. This *samizdat* of friends, acquaintances, and fellow-travellers renders the issue of Merton's acquiescence to the writing ban entirely moot. The ban itself may have only strengthened Merton's resolve to enter more fully into the peace movement. Submitting to the demands of his Superiors, Merton could still engage controversial issues from the briar patch of his correspondence by "throwing stones in the air, and if someone yells I know the stone came down." The extent of that engagement is thoroughly chronicled in *The Hidden Ground of Love* through the sets of letters (comprising nearly one third of the volume) Merton wrote to the principal figures in the Catholic peace movement of the 60's.

Of no less importance, letters also served an apostolic function. They enabled Merton to act on his sense of pastoral responsibility, whether guiding friends through periods of personal crisis, counselling fellow priests caught between the institutional obligations of obedience and the moral responsibilities of social witness, or simply entering the lives of people as a compassionate voice, a bulwark against "the persistent erosion of all compassion, all human sensitivity" which Merton saw as a blight on the contemporary moral landscape. In response, he worked "the hidden ground of love" in his letters. His counsel grew out of an aggressive, never-failing humanist commitment: "Ultimately," he wrote to one correspondent beset by a string of failures and chronically low self-esteem, "it all gets down to the individual, the person. . . . In the end what really matters is not . . . good breaks, or bad breaks but who you are as a person. And if you have real quality as a person (which you do, let me tell you). . ."

But Merton could frequently detach himself from that ministerial intimacy and shift into the voice of an essayist in his letters, without lapsing into an otherwise impersonal style. This sort of distancing of himself from his correspondents may suggest another pragmatic purpose of letter writing itself—namely, that Merton capitalized on the prototypical function of letters. He used his letters, in some instances, as a proving ground to hammer out nascent ideas, sound them off his correspondents, and later reshape them into formal essays. Many of the letter sets in *The Hidden Ground of Love* deserve further investigation with respect to this interesting connection. For example, in his correspondence with John Tracy Ellis, Merton began thrashing out a theological position on thermonuclear weapons and the traditional doctrine of a Just War, later refined (if not altogether successfully) in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. His letters to D.T. Suzuki and Heinrich Dumoulin show Merton struggling to temper his understanding of the ambiguities of Zen. And elsewhere, aggressive exchanges with prominent members of the religious left—Dorothy Day, Rosemary Ruether, Martin Marty, Daniel Berrigan, and William DuBay, among others—tested Merton's ecumenical mettle and forced him to reconcile his ascetic bent with a vigorous new communitarian humanism which surfaced during the years following Vatican II. In such exchanges as these, Merton worked to clarify and balance—sometimes with certainty, sometimes with desperation and confusion—a contemplative ideal and the responsibilities of social action, the very same issue that formed the principal motif of Merton's late writing, particularly evident in *Faith and Violence* and posthumous collections of essays such as *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *Love and Living*.

That later issue is central to *The Hidden Ground of Love*. It recurs frequently because of William Shannon's decision to select letters reflecting Merton's thoughts on both religious experience and social concerns. By wisely arranging the first volume of letters around these two major themes, Monsignor Shannon has created a format that captures two poles of a central tension in Merton's life during the 60's: contemplation and social witness. Perhaps Merton resolved that tension on a spiritual plane, so that his monastic commitment and his penchant for mixing it up in worldly affairs fused into "two facets," as William Shannon writes in his introduction, "of a single life." But many of the letters themselves indicate that Merton had considerable difficulty resolving such tensions in an existential sense. Pressed by certain correspondents, Merton frequently encountered an unnerving collision

between his vocation as monk—hemmed in, he confessed to Rosemary Ruether, by “an ironbound institutionalism built on a perverse doctrine of authority-humility-obedience”—and his self-image, projected through his published writing as well as his letters, of an anti-institutional, iconoclastic social critic. That tension surfaced often in Merton’s letters to members of the Catholic peace movement when he had to wrestle with his public advocacy of social justice issues while struggling privately to advance his monastic agenda. Merton admitted to many friends that this was his major “personal problem,” “my own difficulty”—leaping into the fray of public debate while taking on a “full-time job just coping with one’s own damn mind in solitude.” He experimented with a variety of self-labels in an effort to discover some existential middle ground, including “Christian anarchist,” “anti-ascetic humanist,” “secularized hermit,” “burnt-out priest,” “ex con,” “non-monk,” and “man as mere man” . . . “a normal human being who likes to smell the flowers and look at girls if they are around, and who likes the clouds, etc.” But perhaps no label could adequately contain the antinomies of Thomas Merton’s character.

Nowhere was he forced to confront the inconsistencies of his existential situation more directly than in his letters. That he welcomed such a confrontation suggests Merton’s letter writing may have ultimately fulfilled, finally, a therapeutic purpose, largely confessional and cathartic. Committed as he was to a life of authentic solitude, for example, Merton gave himself the freedom in many of his letters to confess that he needed much light and guidance in that life. Similarly, a man whose books exuded the strength and certainty of a spiritual director could confess in his letters to a degree of self-delusion and confusion when surveying the direction of his own spiritual life. A contemplative could confess to having arrived at the end of his contemplative rope, a monk to his monumental struggle with monasticism. And a Catholic could admit to having serious problems with the Bible and the Church.

While such confessions as these may reveal a shadow of Merton’s self-doubt, rarely seen by the public at-large, they shouldn’t be construed as full-blown crises of faith. The confessional function of letters served a different and more useful cathartic purpose. Merton’s confessions of self-doubt and uncertainty justified his often bellicose attacks on a monastic institution to which he had, after all, committed himself. Letters allowed him to vent his bottled-up antagonisms. But, and this is very important: only by admitting his own failures *first* would he then attack the shortcomings of his own institution. Viewed in this context, Merton’s assaults on Cistercian monasticism or his unflattering characterizations of his Superiors are not so much undignified wisecracks as good healthy therapy for him. That pattern of confessing uncertainty in the direction of his own life followed by aggressive criticisms of institutional monasticism is repeated throughout many of the letter sets in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, particularly in the letters to Daniel Berrigan, Dorothy Day, James Forest, and Rosemary Ruether, where the dynamic therapeutic function of Merton’s letter writing is most obvious.

It was with such correspondents as these too where Merton enjoyed the fruits of his own self-therapy by arriving at a “more existential view of the whole monastic situation,” a perspective which answers a question of great fascination to a generation of image-makers in Merton studies. “If I hold on to [my monastic vocation], which I certainly do,” he said to James Forest, “it is no longer on the grounds that it is “best ” but more on existential grounds: ‘It may be absurd, I may not understand it, it may look like madness in the eyes of all these cats, but it happens to be what I am called to do, and this is what I am going to do,’ . . . [It] seems to be what God wants of me . . . I hope,” he wrote to Rosemary Ruether. “I don’t expect anyone on earth to congratulate me for this, and as far as I am concerned, it is just damned stupid, but it seems to be what I have to do.” And to Dorothy Day:

. . . it seems to me that I am almost bound to stay here even for the worst of motives, let alone the best. Here is one place where they will have me and feed me and tolerate my presence permanently. How do I know I would find the same charity elsewhere?