

# THE MAIL FROM TUNIS, PROBABLY

Review of

*THE HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE:*

The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns  
Selected & Edited by William H. Shannon

—Reviewed by **Raymond Nelson**

Perhaps there is just a slight misnomer in the subtitle William Shannon chose for this first representative selection from Thomas Merton's enormous correspondence. Merton's letters were brimming over with *ideas* about religious teachings, traditions, controversies, and similar externals, but true religious *experience*—or, more properly, the experience that underlies the religious life—inspired his deepest privacy, and usually left him reticent or cryptic. As Merton himself observed, his remarkable letter of 1966 to the Sufi scholar Abdul Aziz, in which he proceeded for once to describe in specific detail his method of seeking “the Face of the Invisible,” was exceptional. “I do not ordinarily write about such things,” he told Aziz in conclusion, “and I ask you therefore to be discreet about it.”

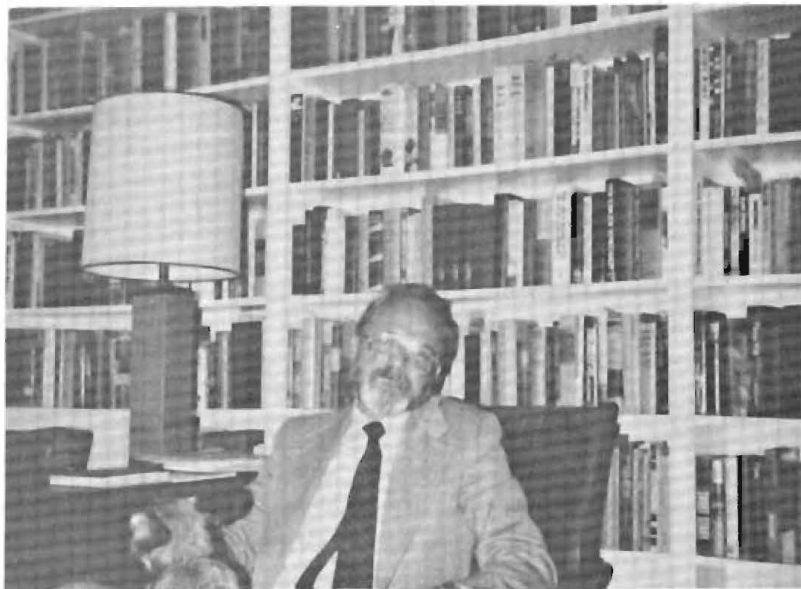
On the few occasions when he did write about experiential mysteries, Merton cultivated metaphors and indirection, according, as he put it in another context, to “my own craft, since I am a poet rather than a theologian.” That last remark occurred in a letter of 1962, when Merton was indeed composing letters of considerable artistic merit, and it marks one culmination, as it awakens many echoes, of his long struggle with his literary identity. To run across it here is a great pleasure. In the journal of 1949 that he incorporated into *The Sign of Jonas* he had complained, almost bitterly, that “It is not so much fun to live the spiritual life with the spiritual equipment of an artist.” However, as this volume illustrates, he learned by living how wrong he was, that spiritual artistry was glorious fun after all. It was also a way of approaching, imaging, even perhaps of apprehending momentarily the ineffable source or ground of being, which always seemed to exist, as it were, just on the other side of perception.

Religious experience, then, is as pervasive in this volume as the flavor of salt in water, but like salt it works invisibly. One perceives it by its effect, in implication, allusion, or apposition, rather than by direct observation. To press the issue further would be to quibble with Shannon, whose conceptualizations and editorial asides are basically sound and helpful. His coupling of the religious and social issues in Merton's career is particularly revealing. He defines the relationship in a notably concise and lucid paragraph about the common identity in God in his introduction, and his analysis holds up. After reading through Merton's passionate letters one is struck anew by how inextricably and necessarily his celebrated spirituality, mysticism, and Christian personalism were bound with his vision of the just earthly order. He often found himself his own first citizen, but he always persisted in his long struggle toward what another generation of another kind of revolutionaries called, provocatively enough for a Christian, “the beloved community.”

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The alliance of concerns was already influential in the very first letter in the volume. As he contemplated the problems of his vocation in 1941, Merton shared with Catherine de Hueck his intuition that the great political imperative could be nothing less than “going out and being a saint.” Two sentences later he turned to ruminations about the failures of Francisco Franco and the possibility of a “completely Catholic government.” That dual impulse to saintliness and social justice, which was always oriented on the far side of the Catholic left, informed his lifelong championship of minorities, mavericks, down-and-outers, beatniks, the lost, strayed, and abandoned, spiritual pearl divers from *The Catholic Worker*, rebel poets from Latin America and Southeast Asia, and a host of other marginal people and central causes. It also instructed his noble, still eloquent and stirring resistance to nuclear brinkmanship and the American adventure in Vietnam which, especially after 1962, involved him more or less continually in conflict with ecclesiastical superiors and the conservative element in the church. Among the many welcome contributions of this collection is that it makes readily available for the first time about one-third of Merton’s famous “Cold War Letters,” which had once circulated only in mimeographed form, all but surreptitiously, among friends and allies. That these ambitious social essays are also often memorable spiritual documents reflects the curiously dialectical growth of personality during Merton’s last years. As he fought circumstances and his superiors for an ever more radical solitude in his hermitage, he became increasingly communitarian in his public voice, so profoundly involved in social causes that he was eventually identified with them. I cannot be the only person who, some two decades ago, picked up one of Merton’s books because I had been told he was a powerful opponent of the war in Vietnam, not knowing until I read the notes on the dust wrapper that he was a monk and, for many years, a celebrated Catholic thinker.

By the middle of the 1960s the linked issues of civil rights and peace were making startling demands on Merton’s time and attention, but never enough that he allowed them to restrict his range of joys and activities. He managed a surprising amount of spiritual counseling by mail. The troubled hearts and searching questions of such diverse correspondents as Etta Gullick, James Forest, and John Harris, an Anglican theologian, Catholic peace activist, and Boris Pasternak’s chief Western correspondent respectively, usually brought out the best in him—his great tenderness, honesty, insight, and tact. Generally speaking, his most interesting letters are addressed to such people, distinguished enough in their own work but largely unknown to the public, with whom he could relax and speak freely.



RAYMOND NELSON

His letters to celebrities—Jacqueline Kennedy, D.T. Suzuki, Pope John XXIII— seem excessively deferential and uncomfortable. Indeed, the conventional language in which a monk is apparently required to address popes is so coy and florid that it precludes, as perhaps it was intended to do, any real communication.

The other religious activity that emerges most forcefully from these letters was essentially ecumenical in nature. Merton energetically swapped doctrinal notes and observations about the contemplative life with Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, and all sorts of Christians, of the Eastern as well as the Western churches, Protestants as well as Catholics. He seized upon opportunities for such interchanges as enthusiastically as any child might seize the occasion for a new excursion, and in them he maintained an admirable humility. Although he refused to blur distinctions of belief and value, he was strikingly undogmatic, undefensive, and hospitable. “I do think . . . that you and I are one in Christ,” he wrote to Etta Gullick, who had wondered if he wasn’t troubled because she was by his law a heretic, “and hence the presence of some material heresy (according to my side of the fence) does not make that much difference. Certainly truth is important but there are all sorts of circumstances one must consider, and as far as I am concerned you are what you should be, and what you can be, and thank God for it . . .”

Meanwhile, he was also, more or less simply, an isolated man with a powerful genius for friendship, who wrote from his gregarious solitude not only about spiritual and social concerns, but also with an entirely friendly attention to such things of the world as food (including beer), psychedelics (he was curious but skeptical), the moods and seasons of rural Kentucky, good reading, good karma, psychoanalysis, pornography, Chuang Tzu, Rabelais, Cardinal Spellman, Karl Marx, memories of France and England, and a multitude of other people and subjects that aroused his truly catholic interest. Once he even asked W. H. Ferry to send him examples of magazine advertising (which eventually contributed to the texture of the demonic cityscapes of *Cables to the Ace*), but he called off his experiment in popular culture—retching, he said—when he saw what had happened to the integrity of language and the wisdom of the senses in the marketplace of 1966.

Regaled with so rich and varied a correspondence, the news and musings of “a pilgrim and an exile in life,” moody at times with an exile’s sufferings, but full of wit, discovery, and incessant new beginnings, one is tempted to get cute and say, here is God’s plenty. Maybe so. At least, here is Thomas Merton. Here he is to the life. He was often a masterly, always a prolific correspondent, and in the aggregate his letters comprise a self-portrait on the grand scale. He emerges from them as a strange congruence of times, countries, and loyalties, bursting with high spirits and hot angers, vulnerable, easily wounded by the world, but notably durable and resilient. He could be loving (usually), ornery (rarely), and rebellious (always), headstrong and impulsive, a “clown for Christ,” a prophet, a dreamer and a contriver, full of mad schemes and tactical shrewdness. Above all, out of his various turns and disguises, he unwittingly but unmistakably reveals himself in the stubborn goodness that made him into a man to whom people instinctively looked in dark times.

Despite the pleasures of such company, the task of garnering, selecting, organizing, and editing Merton’s letters must have been enough to give any sane editor a fine case of the heebie-jeebies. These documents exist in staggering numbers, and Shannon’s inclination is clearly to be generous in selecting among them—so generous that he prints more of the correspondence with W. H. Ferry, for instance, than Ferry himself printed in his small book, *Letters from Tom. The Hidden Ground of Love* is the first of a projected four volumes, topically defined, of selected correspondence. Other volumes will include letters to relatives and special friends, letters to writers, and letters concerning spiritual direction and

monasticism. Clearly, Merton's religious and social concerns are scarcely separable from his friendships or literary activities, so that the assignment of correspondents to such categories must be to some degree arbitrary. Perhaps the decision to organize volumes by this method was unavoidable, but it can also be irritating. One suddenly finds oneself wondering, for instance, why in the book of religious and social letters there are none addressed to, say, Jacques Maritain or Ernesto Cardenal. The answer is unquestionably that these important figures have been assigned to other volumes. Either man would be appropriately represented in any one of them. But after a reader has shelled out his \$27.95 and found no Maritain, he is at least entitled to grumble.

Similar dilemmas are reflected in the internal organization of the volume. Merton's early letters to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, the only early letters represented, are placed first. After that, correspondents are arranged alphabetically. Letters to them are gathered in sets, and ordered chronologically within sets, so that each set, in effect, produces a separate, coherent narrative. The problems of selection and organization are complicated by the consideration that all but a handful of letters are drawn from the period after 1960. As a result, the book assumes the effect of continually starting, stopping, and starting again—continually telling and retelling essentially the same story about the events of Merton's last few years.

To this cyclic rehearsal of his activities and concerns, Merton contributes his own repetitions of matter. He wrote as if by reflex, as unselfconsciously and nearly as uninterruptedly as most men breathe, so that he frequently wrote and rewrote a single basic newsletter for many correspondents. We learn innumerable times, or so it seems, about his fight for the hermitage, his removal to it, his difference with his abbot, his frustrations with ecclesiastical censors. Gradually, these episodes lose something of their flavor. In particular, the insistently reiterated, patiently detailed arguments and statements of position about nuclear warfare begin to wear on a reader after a few exposures. The repetitiousness of both material and structure thus make *The Hidden Ground of Love* a more rewarding book to read in than to read through.

The repetitions exist in nature, as it were—in a way any man as physically removed as Merton must get about the business of living in an extended community. They can be eased through artifice. It is at least arguable that Shannon's editorial compromise, which aspires to the advantages of completeness while remaining partial, should be abandoned and that the problems it addressed be resolved either by publishing every thing or, more realistically, by adopting drastically exclusive principles of selection. As it stands, Shannon's is an often delightful volume, which will reward any reader with an abundance of good feeling and good thought, but it is marred by the same giantism that troubled Michael Mott's otherwise admirable biography of Merton. The temptation to reflect Merton's moral, political, and artistic stature, the emotional size of the man, by the physical size of a book should be resisted. Surely it would be more charitable to rescue him from the false starts, duplications, and longwindedness necessitated by circumstances long since past, to allow the raw force of his integrity and the saltiness of his wit to be felt as his correspondents felt them, pure and free, as if for the first time. When that happens, as this volume can eloquently testify, Merton is not only supremely readable, he is essential, an ample source of nourishment and wisdom.