

TWO VOCATIONS

Review of

Peter Kountz

*THOMAS MERTON AS WRITER & MONK:
A CULTURAL STUDY, 1915-1951*

Preface by Martin E. Marty

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Reviewed by **Carl Simmons**

At a glance, it is easy to see how Thomas Merton's two vocations as writer and monk could compliment one another. Both involve silence and self-exploration, and the potential to hide one's self within either vocation is ever-present. However, Merton went to great lengths in his writing to make clear that his entering the monastery was not an escape from life, and that he could not let his writing become an instrument to allow him to escape from his responsibilities as a monk. Merton's trials in reconciling these two vocations is the basis for Peter Kountz's thesis. The book is divided into three sections, representing three separate periods of Merton's life up to 1951 — the evolution of a writer (1915-1936), the evolution of a monk (1936-1941), and the fusion of monk and writer (1941-1951).

From the start, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk* has several limitations. First, in stopping his study at the year 1951, ten years into Merton's life at Gethsemani, Kountz allows us to see Merton's acceptance of himself as both writer and monk but not the fruits of that reconciliation. Other limitations are in the contents themselves, the most serious being that this book was written in 1975. Consequently, the benefit of fifteen-plus years of Merton research and commentary is absent here. However, the fact that this information is old does not necessarily doom it to be dated as well. What Kountz does have to work with are Merton's writings, and he quotes



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liberally from them, “in the belief that Merton tells his own story best, even unknowingly.” This is a reasonable statement, especially when dealing with the writings of someone as painstakingly open as Merton. However, on far too many occasions this device becomes a cop out, and the result is that there is very little in the first two sections of this book that cannot be figured out by even the most casual reader of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which is quoted extensively here.

In his introduction, Kountz claims that his is the first book to deal solely with the relationship of writer and monk during a set period of Merton’s life. However, the first two sections of the book have little in the way of actual “relationship” — Kountz usually talks about either one or the other. The reader could have benefited more by reading the primary sources so often quoted here. When Kountz comments for himself, especially in the first two parts, the tone is often detached and usually just an encapsulation of the narrative between the two passages he is quoting. Also, if Kountz is trying to illustrate the relationship between writer and monk in Merton’s early years, he missed a golden opportunity by breezing past Merton’s relationships with, among others, Mark Van Doren, Edward Rice, and Robert Lax (especially), who in those early years personified much of what Kountz is supposedly trying to get at — the integration of devout belief with literary expression.

The third section does not justify the first two, but it is by far the strongest section of the book because it does portray, at times vividly, the relationship that Kountz was looking for in the first two sections. And indeed, Merton’s increasing anxiety about his two vocations as monk and writer comes to a head in his published journal *The Sign of Jonas* (the primary source for this section), particularly in his discontinuing of the journal in April of 1950. Another well-placed quote is from Merton’s essay “Poetry and the Contemplative Life” which perhaps states the conflict most clearly: “. . . poetry can, indeed, help bring us rapidly through that part of the journey to contemplation that is called active; but when we are entering the realm of true contemplation, where eternal happiness begins, it may turn around and bar our way.”

Now, as for Kountz’s insistence (echoed by Martin Marty’s preface) that past Merton books have not dealt directly with the relationship between writer and monk: first, how can one *not* talk about Merton without discussing that relationship? Michael Mott, Monica Furlong, etc., may have talked about other things but that relationship was never far from the heart of the matter.

Second, off the top of my head, one Merton study at least, that does provide an illuminating study of this relationship is Elena Malits’ *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton’s Transforming Journey* (1980). Incidentally, the main body of this book picks up right where Kountz leaves off, with those works of the 1950s and 1960s that illustrate Merton’s new found focus and ongoing discovery of God and himself. It is a quote from *The Sign of Jonas*, used by Malits, that would have best closed this volume: “God will prepare me for his own hermitage for my last days, and meanwhile my work is my hermitage because it is *writing* that helps me most of all to be a solitary and a contemplative here at Gethsemani.”