

## READING SOMEONE ELSE'S MAIL

Review of

At Home in the World:

*The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*

Edited by Mary Tardiff, OP

with an Introduction by Rosemary Radford Ruether;

and an Afterword by Christine M. Bochen

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995

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Reviewed by **Paul Ruttle, CP**

"I am just as fleshy as you, baby, and I am also just as much a 'thinking animal' as you." Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote these words to Thomas Merton in a letter dated March 21, 1967 in response to some remarks he made to her in a letter just two days earlier. The opening line of her March 21 letter was — "I am really kind of disappointed in you" — and in her P.S. she continues — "... Sorry you find me so abstract. If I weren't a woman would it have occurred to you to accuse me of being cerebral? Interesting resentment there . . . I wouldn't mention the resentment bit if it wasn't so absolutely predictable." Merton responded on March 24 by explaining: "I don't know why you frighten me so," He stated that he found her to be cerebral — "probably because I resented my mother's intellectuality." And the very next day in still another letter Merton continues his defense — "I am not mad at you for being an 'intellectual woman,' but only for seeming to reject me. I don't take sweetly to rejection, I tell you."

Clearly this correspondence was very different for Thomas Merton. This remarkable collection of letters between Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether offers the reader a rare glimpse of Merton on the run. Despite the fact that most of his writing is very honest and personal, even autobiographical, it is still startling to see such a vulnerable Merton. He had met his intellectual equal and he didn't quite know how to handle such blunt honesty. For her part, Ruether was relentless in her pursuit of intellectual and spiritual integrity and demanded the same from Merton.

Initially there was nothing in this correspondence that indicated that this would become such an intense exchange of ideas. It all started innocently enough on August 12, 1966 when Ruether wrote to Merton and sent him one of her articles to read. She was just beginning her career and Merton was already famous at the time. The correspondence ends on February 18, 1968 with a letter from Merton discussing the disposition of some of his drawings that he had given care of to Ruether. In this final letter Merton also muses that with his new abbot — "I may be able to get to some fairly interesting meetings abroad." Between these two rather mundane letters lies an intense and exciting correspondence that calls forth the integrity of both authors.

Ruether herself in her excellent introduction tells us: "What I was trying to test in this correspondence was the crucial issue for me, at that time: whether it was, in fact, actually possible to be a Roman Catholic and to be a person of integrity." She considered Merton to be "a committed Roman Catholic intellectual of advanced spiritual development" which in her own words explains a "certain shocking style of frankness in these letters." While it is enjoyable to watch the fireworks spark through their correspondence, most of the time they are busy sounding out new ideas on each other. In fact on April 9, 1967 Merton closed his letter

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— “With my love, *Tom*.” Ruether would reply to this letter in early May, 1967 by closing her letter with — “Love, *Rosemary*.” From here on the correspondence loses some of the intensity of the earlier letters. The tone becomes quite friendly and even somewhat polite.

The one notable exception to this “cooling off” is a letter from Ruether written on August 9, 1967, in which she confides to Merton — “I am very puzzled by this relationship with your Abbot. It sounds very destructive for both of you . . . There was a time when this kind of crappy stuff was accepted under a mystique of obedience, but people aren’t swallowing that shit any more . . . The most Christian thing you could do for that chap is to tell him to go to hell.”

Those readers familiar with Merton’s writings will discover some of Merton’s thought processes revealed. Here we get to witness Merton “tease out” some ideas that he would use later in his published writings. Such is the case in his letter of September 11, 1967 when he wrote to Ruether about his interest in the Cargo Cults of World War II. (These “cults” sprang up spontaneously throughout Polynesia in response to supplies being “miraculously” dropped from American military planes to the troops occupying the various islands.)

The Cargo syndrome, which people regard as confined to a few “savages,” seems to be pretty universal. Throw out everything, all the “old” and all property, shell money, native clothes, etc., etc. Then wait for Cargo to come from the land of the dead (USA). Shake, quake, have visions, etc., while waiting. Cargo will come in form of complete magic technology that does everything for you and fills the huts with so many goodies you can no longer move. White man’s Jesus religion was bum steer, because there was no Cargo. This one is the real stuff. In the end it tapers off into a kind of Melanesian secular city pitch, we have to work for it after all, let’s try liberal politics. Meanwhile the guerrillas are getting wised up. And so on.

In a letter dated December 31, 1967, Merton wrote: “Haven’t got anything on paper about Cargo yet, except parts of a long poem I am writing about things like Cargo, the Ghost Dance, Indian revolts in Yucatan, etc.” That “long poem” is, of course, what would eventually become the magnificent *The Geography of Lograire*. He also toys with these ideas in a wonderful little book entitled *Ishi Means Man*, which, in my opinion, is an often overlooked and under-appreciated important Merton work.

As I stated earlier, there is an excellent introduction to this book by Ruether in which she looks back on these letters from the vantage point of today, and a very fine Afterword written by Christine M. Bochen in which she places this body of letters in the larger context of Merton’s life. Taken together these sections effectively frame these letters in such a way that anyone unfamiliar with either Merton or Ruether could still be able to appreciate them. Even those familiar with Merton and/or Ruether will spend their time well by reading these two sections. This collection of letters also included two “form” letters from Merton and one from Ruether. Due to the thoughtfulness of the editor, Mary Tardiff, OP and the generosity of Ruether, we get to see one of the drawings that Merton left to Ruether reproduced in this book.

My congratulations to all involved. This is a thoroughly enjoyable, insightful and personal work that is hard not to devour in one sitting. We can all be grateful that Merton and Ruether cared enough to commit themselves to such an intense and honest correspondence.

Besides — it’s fun reading someone else’s mail!