

# RUN TO THE MOUNTAIN: A REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Thomas Merton

*Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation/  
The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume One 1939-1941*

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick Hart, OCSO

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995

xvi, 478 pages / \$27.50 hardcover

Reviews by **Arthur W. Biddle, Jack Kelly, & Paul J. Spaeth**

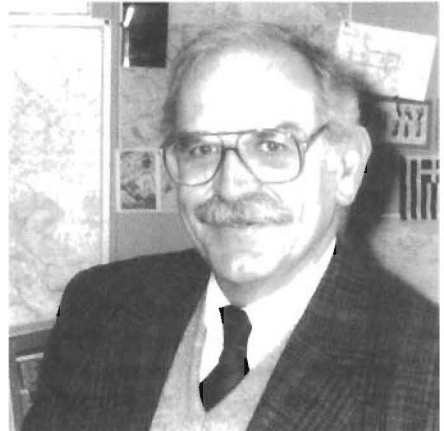
## I

### Arthur W. Biddle, REHEARSING STYLE AND THEME

Does the world really need yet *another* series of books devoted to the previously unpublished writings of Thomas Merton? Brother Patrick Hart and HarperSanFrancisco think so. *Run to the Mountain* is the first of a seven volume edition of Merton's journals. Sub-titled "The Story of a Vocation," *RTM* covers the period from May 1939 to December 1941 when Merton entered the Abbey of Gethsemani. But wait a minute — didn't Merton himself publish this material in 1959 in *The Secular Journal*? And what about *The Sign of Jonas* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* which Merton also edited and saw published? And after his death we saw several more books based on his journals: *A Vow of Conversation*, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, *The Alaskan Journal*, and *The Asian Journal*. Is there really anything new left to discover? Is there really a point to all this bookmaking?

These are not just rhetorical questions. They are more than a writer's attempt to find a provocative lead for this review. They are real questions for me — and for many others, I suspect. Much of what the reader finds in the 471 pages of *RTM* will be familiar from *The Secular Journal*, down even to the major section titles of "Perry Street, New York," "Cuban Interlude," and "Saint Bonaventure's, New York." But *RTM* contains much more that is completely absent from *SJ*. For instance, the last entry in *SJ* is November 27, 1941 in which Merton agonizes over his vocation. Should he join Baroness de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem or the Trappists in Kentucky? At the end of the entry, he is leaning toward the monastery: "But going to the Trappists is exciting, it fills me with awe and with desire . . . I shall speak to one of the Friars." It's an artful conclusion to the book and, of course, the reader in 1959 knew how the story ended. *RTM* doesn't end there, however. It includes another week's worth of entries that reveal better than anything else could just what Merton was thinking and praying about in those last days before entering Gethsemani. Some of this is familiar ground. Merton traces the events of those days in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What's missing from *SSM* and *SJ* are the weavings of continuing self-doubt, of celebration and joyful prayer, even of self-justification and rationalization revealed in the rawer pages of *RTM*. This is the kind of thing that makes publishing these journals worthwhile and reading them such a treat.

Just what else does this book have that merits the time of



ARTHUR W. BIDDLE

Photo by Sidney Poger

readers familiar with Merton's published works? More than anywhere else (with the possible exception of his letters), these journals show Merton's playfulness and wry sense of humor. During the Perry Street months he was fond of making lists, mainly silly. Here's a list of some of his lists:

"Digression: List of some neutral things I have not thought of or mentioned or even heard mentioned well, this year"

"Merton's political memories"

"Attitudes a writer may take — a selection by no means, of course exhaustive" [Number One is "That happiness *is* found on the Staten Island Ferry."]

"Modern words — of our great century"

As a young writer Merton had a love affair with words. In January 1940 he reflects on the beginning of a new decade, which leads him to consider numbers. Then for two and one-half pages he plays with numbers and words — Four Roses, a three ring circus, the Seven Dwarfs, and the like — before settling in to explore the idea of the forties decade through history. After a lot of verbal clowning, he concludes:

By this we may tell nobody knows what 1940 holds: we think about Picasso, Joyce, etc. being the ones responsible for everything now: but the future will hold us responsible. I don't mean that corny phrase to be so important sounding. But what the physiognomy of 1940 will look like in a museum of cultural relics depends on fellows as old and a little older than I am. Soon matters will be out of the hands of the generation that is 50 or 60 now — Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, our fathers. It is hard to realize that these men will not be our contemporaries in our maturity, and that, in our maturity, we will not be able to hold them entirely responsible any longer for the way the world is.

And one more list in its entirety:

Now look you: there have been three important things that have happened this year.

1. The publication of *Finnegan's Wake*.
2. The War in Europe and the Russian German Pact.
3. The Picasso Exhibition.

This last list speaks volumes about Merton's state of mind in November 1939: the onset of world war takes second place to the publication of Joyce's masterpiece, *Finnegan's Wake*. Despite his European background, he seems no more concerned about the great war than most of his fellow Americans. For him as for them, his attitude was to change in the months to come. Tracing Merton's thoughts about the war was for me one of the most interesting aspects of these journals. During his visit to Cuba in April and May 1940 he pens several reactions to events in Europe, largely cynical, especially towards England. He complains of her "absurd half-hearted attempt to defend Norway against the Germans."

The English don't care very desperately about saving their empire, but it doesn't seem sporting to let it go without a gesture.

The cause of England in this war can be said to be just only in-so-far as it is somewhat less unjust than that of the Nazis . . . .

Sometimes Merton evinces an amusing, if sophomoric, weariness with it all as in this opening sentence of the Saint Bonaventure section: "The French have been driven south to the Loire, and all my friends have gone to the lake, and I am sitting by myself in the middle of the driveway outside the cottage, looking at the woods."

It is during this Olean summer and fall of 1940, though, that Merton begins to confront the realities of the war, especially after watching a newsreel.

Today [October 27, 1940] I saw a movie of London under bombing, and heard recorded the sound of the air raid alarm and of the all clear signal. For the first time in my life, I think, I momentarily wanted to be in the war . . . . Bombs are beginning to fall in my life . . . . For the first time I imagined that maybe I belonged there, not here. I have responsibilities in England, I left my childhood behind there.

Merton's father Owen died there in 1931, when the boy was not yet sixteen. His year at Cambridge of 1933-34 ended in disgrace when he was sent to his grandparents on Long Island. Motion pictures, the medium that Tom and his brother John Paul became addicted to, brought the war home in ways that cold print was unable to do.

Early in *Run to the Mountain*, Merton reflects on the purposes and values of keeping a journal. He is half apologetic about writing simply to remember things, but acknowledges what most journal keepers know: "Writing these things down, they clarify themselves, they move in words and sentences, and so take shape while in my own mind they are formless and not articulate." The value of *RTM* lies, I think, in allowing the reader to witness the development of a writer and a vocation as neither *The Secular Journal* nor *The Seven Storey Mountain* could. These journals are not artless; they are the work of an apprentice writer rehearsing his style and theme. And they also reveal the *process* of introspection that led Thomas Merton from Greenwich Village to the Abbey of Gethsemani. That is reason enough to read them.