

Merton Amidst the Intellectuals

Review of

Thomas Merton's American Prophecy

by Robert Inchausti

Albany: SUNY, 1998

x, 210 pages / \$59.50 hardcover, \$19.95 paperback

Reviewed by Ross Labrie

This is an engaging book, clear-headed and written in limpid prose, in which the author attempts to place Merton in the context of American intellectual history. In fact, Inchausti situates Merton in the wider context of twentieth-century intellectual history, beginning with a profile of Merton as a prophet according to the use of that term by Kierkegaard. While much of the first half of the book includes sensitive summaries of Merton's thought in a roughly chronological survey of his writings, the whole transcends the parts, and the resulting portrait of Merton is pithy and faithful to the original. For example, Inchausti describes Merton's entering of Trappist life as not a retreat from the world but a countercultural alternative to it, a life that would nourish the dissident in Merton as it had, according to Inchausti, the desert fathers against the Roman Empire. Whatever the political rebelliousness of the desert fathers might have been, one is forced to admit that the Trappists do not seem to have produced many like Thomas Merton—especially prior to his arrival. On the other hand, Inchausti is right about Merton's view and use of Trappist spirituality as the basis for his adopted status as outsider.

The question of what it was that led Merton to see Trappist spirituality in the way in which he did has as much to do in my estimation with his earlier attraction to Blake as it does to the desert fathers. Although Inchausti deals with the Blake influence, this was a side of Merton that I thought he could have placed more weight on in gauging Merton's eventual state of mind regarding the standoff between the self and society. I think Inchausti is correct in pointing out that Dennis McInerny in his study of Merton and the American Romantics doesn't quite reveal the distinctiveness of Merton's Romanticism, but I'm not sure that Inchausti does either. Instead, he throws it into the pot, as it were, rather than isolating it as the most important transforming influence in Merton's particular understanding of Christianity. While Inchausti recognizes Merton's emphasis on the self, for example, Merton's sense of the "enormity of our own souls," he doesn't bring out what an extraordinary view of the soul that is in terms of Christian thought. A comparison of Merton's view here with the abasement of the soul in Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* would quickly reveal the difference.

The most interesting and original chapter in Inchausti's book is that in which he considers Merton in relation to postmodernism, focusing particularly but not exclusively on the writing of Jacques

Lacan. In a sense there are similarities between Merton and the postmodernists that need to be recognized, including Merton's playful interest in language, his deconstructing of it in works like *Cables to the Ace* and to some extent in *The Geography of Lograire*. I would add Merton's habit of mixing the discourses of high art and of popular culture. At the same time, as Inchausti indicates, Merton was finally interested in meaning (as revealed in his writing about symbolism, for example) and should probably be regarded as a modernist rather than a post-modernist. Like Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Merton wanted to freshen language so as to increase its meaning, not in order to reveal its indeterminacy.

Regarding Merton's place in twentieth-century intellectual history, Inchausti is instructive when he juxtaposes Merton with figures like Norman Mailer in an effort to clarify Merton's as opposed to Mailer's species of dissidence. Similarly, Inchausti compares Merton with Reinhold Niebuhr in an effort to silhouette Merton's distinctiveness in revealing the value of contemplation to one who experienced it and who described it in psychological terms that opened that experience to twentieth-century readers, whether or not they had any prior knowledge of Catholicism or monasticism. Sometimes, Inchausti's contextualizing of Merton in terms of other well-known writers is cursory and unconvincing—as in the aligning of Merton as a representative of “radical democratic individualism” with e.e. cummings, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, Lyndon Johnson, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. The crossovers are simply too loose here to be useful. Where Inchausti is most persuasive is in his illuminating depiction of Merton as involved in a dialogic relation with the writers around him through which he paradoxically searched the lives and minds of others for evidence of his own being. While this searching might be seen as compatible with Merton's Catholic and incarnational view of the world, it is a major, distinctive note of his writing. Here, Inchausti has his eye on the essence of Merton's contribution to our time in showing how the absolutes in Merton's vision canvassed the plurality of being.