

# Tracking Pilgrims' Passages

Review of

*Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography*

By David J. Leigh

New York: Fordham University Press, 1999

200 pages / \$35.00 hardbound; \$17.00 paperback

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Autobiographies, it often seems, are the genre *du jour*. From Tammy Faye to Howard Stern, few seem to be able to resist the desire to lay life's cards on the table, jokers wild. But much rarer are accounts of the movements and progressions of the author's spiritual life, and rarer yet are clear and straightforward analyses of why the best of these spiritual autobiographies touch our lives as closely as they do.

David J. Leigh in his new book *Circuitous Journeys: Modern Spiritual Autobiography* focuses on ten twentieth-century examples of the art of spiritual autobiography: single and signal works by Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, C. S. Lewis, M. K. Gandhi, Malcolm X, Black Elk, Paul Cowan, Rigoberta Menchu, Dan Wakefield, and Nelson Mandela. Leigh's method is to read them as literary works, that is to say, as works whose authors must find "in narrative the plot, frame, character, setting, and style which prove 'answerable' symbols to the question raised by the life story" (28). Following John S. Dunne, he sees all of them as marked by the typically modern traits of alienation, autonomy, appropriation, and inauthenticity, no matter how much they may begin by building on the archetype of Augustine's *Confessions*. For Leigh the two overarching patterns are first the directional image, the notion of journey which begins in one place and ends in another, and second the spiral, the notion of an often tripartite narrative in which the authors keep returning to the events, the people, the questions, and the struggles which mark the stages in their pilgrimages, thereby arriving where they started and, of course, knowing the place for the first time. The spiral or circuitous journey of the title thus becomes emblematic of the modern quest for meaning and an authenticated self.

In his introduction Leigh supplies the grid by which he proposes to examine the works he has chosen. In its most complete form the grid includes the following: the quest, according to which a life becomes teleological; the childhood events which provide life's questions and often determine the need first to integrate and then to transcend one's parents; the books, sacred objects, rituals, and symbolic objects which initiate or symbolize transformations; the pilgrim's mentors and mediators; the conversion experience, whether sudden or gradual; and finally the turn to writing and eventually autobiography as a means of inscribing the various tensions which keep the spiral from centripetal

collapse. Not surprisingly the grid proves uneven in its application. The chapters on Day, Gandhi, Cowan and Wakefield, for example, are striking and suggestive, while at least for this reader the chapters on Black Elk, Menchu, Malcolm X and Lewis fit well only if one finds comfort in a procrustean bed. One factor common to the first three named in the latter category is that they are “as told to” autobiographies, with all the interpretive difficulties this implies. While Leigh bows in the direction of modern critical theories “that see all writing as a linguistic, psychological, or psychic game that cannot be won” (23), his analyses do not evidence a thorough-going commitment to apply these theories. If ever the notion of “author” cries out for destabilization, would it not be in those works whose words are supplied by another?

Fortunately for readers of the *Seasonal* perhaps the best chapter in the book is its first, which deals with Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Leigh credits Merton with setting him off on the quest which led to this book when in 1961 he read Merton’s spiritual autobiography and “became a lifelong devotee of his vision” (ix). For Leigh, Merton’s book is at once singular and archetypal: singular in its exploration of the self-image of Merton as “*a travelling prisoner in search of freedom and home*” (33 – italics the author’s), archetypal in that “it contains the major traits of modern spiritual autobiographies – Merton’s directional image, his narrative sections, his parental conflicts, his confrontations with death, the sequence of his conversions, and his use of writing” (32). Of these traits, Leigh’s discussions of the first two and the last deserve special comment.

The image of the captive traveler implies both journey and battle. The chapter titles all capture this tension, from the beginning at “Prisoner’s Base” (the safe captive who yet desires to get to a true “home”), through such stages in the journey as “The Harrowing of Hell” (painful motion) and “The Waters of Contradiction” (tormented exodus), to the final arrival at the “True North” home of Gethsemani, where both journey and battle end as all questing and all conflict are brought to a rest marked by the “Sweet Savor of Liberty.”

Two examples of Merton’s figurative language deserve special note, as Leigh rightly observes. First are the many images associated with cleansing: water looms large in Merton’s consciousness, not just the renewing waters of baptism but also cleansing waters, healing waters, dissolving waters, refreshing waters. “Clean” is one of Merton’s favorite positive adjectives, with applications ranging from aesthetics (e.g. the style of Merton’s father’s painting) to the state of one’s soul. To name cleanliness is also, of course, to imply its opposite, and one cannot help but wonder what led to Merton’s obsession with filth and decay, especially the filth and decay that come from within. Second are the images associated with the abyss. The abyss into which one falls, or fears to fall, is an ever-present and primeval terror, source of both attraction and repulsion. Thus Merton in his very language connects us to what Paul Ricoeur would tell us are the symbolic constituents of our identity, the metaphors by which we most easily define ourselves and which we activate so naturally in scripture and sacrament.

Regarding narrative structure, Leigh very effectively analyzes Merton’s patterns. The Dantean precedent suggests the idea of mountain, but a mountain that can only be climbed in a circular way, as in a spiral. The spiral in turn promises several possibilities: surprise encounter, hand-to-hand combat, *agon*, the promise of eternal return. Both quest and conflict can be accommodated by this image, as can the intermediate stages – e.g. separation from parents, guidance of mentor figures, conversion experiences – which lead ultimately to the summit. At the end there remains only Browning’s final mountain-top struggle, the “one fight more, / The best and the last,” which for

Merton was not to happen until Bangkok in December of 1968.

As for writing, Leigh observes that “Merton’s tensions are both intensified and resolved through his writing” (53). He very shrewdly specifies some of the roles that writing seemed to play in Merton’s life. One wishes for an expansion of this section into a thoroughgoing analysis of Merton’s use of “the writing cure,” of self-healing through self-discovery, of coming to the *Logos* through the *logos*. There could be room too for some of the other stylistic features of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which make it so riveting a book for so many. After all, Merton’s skill as a writer – his use of telling detail, of allusion, of rhythmic repetition, to name but three of these other features – is the means by which he dramatizes his life and teaches us to dramatize ours.

On this last point, the value to us of reading the life-journeys of others, Leigh is eloquent. Just as Merton found mediators in his life, mediators whose interventions made possible some new movement on the pilgrim’s way, so we as readers can find in the autobiographer’s achieved self a mediator, a mentor, of our own. Without this encounter “the reader remains locked in the prison of the present self” (28). But with it time is redeemed, new possibilities emerge, new selves are envisioned, new connections are made. Matthew Arnold had it right:

But often, in the din of strife,  
There arises an unspeakable desire  
After the knowledge of our buried life . . .  
A longing to inquire  
Into the mystery of this heart which beats  
So wild, so deep in us –

Merton by example teaches us, gives us hope, holds out the possibility that we will find words at least partially adequate to our self-understanding, so that, again in Arnold’s words,

The eye sinks inward, and the heart lies plain,  
And what we mean, we say, and what we would, we know.

What would we know? For Merton there was but one answer: “Your light, that is, Your darkness, where I am lost and abashed” – an abyss, but one which is strangely cleansed; water, but always “The Waters of Contradiction.”