

# Craft, Communication, Contemplation

Review of

*Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing*

Edited by Robert Inchausti

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215 pages / \$14 paper

Reviewed by **Mary Murray McDonald**

*Echoing Silence* is a book that many people have been waiting for without knowing it. Anyone interested in Thomas Merton as a writer has pages of *The Sign of Jonas* marked because there he outlines his struggles to balance his monastic and artistic vocations as so many people do. In his edited collection of Merton's writings, Robert Inchausti has allowed us to view Merton discussing only writing. Unlike the journals where Merton considers a variety of subjects over many pages, this collection gives us a rare glimpse into Merton at work – how concerned a writer and reader he was, his progressions, his influences, his camaraderie with other writers, his values about the craft of writing, and his intense love for truth in writing.

This text would be valuable chiefly for those readers who wish to pursue the spiritual dimension of the vocation of writing. Rarely does this subject come up in writing workshops, writers' groups, or in books on writing. The first chapter is devoted to this subject, and readers will find themselves pausing and putting down the text to mull over their own vocations, which is what contemplative writing like Merton's has always been meant for. Readers wishing to know Merton at his craft would enjoy this book for its richness – it is easier to see Merton integrating the incredible amounts of both reading and writing he did in these chapters. This collection also gives a greater appreciation for the care Merton took in his writing – how much work it was, how high his standards were, the many types of writing he did – despite his own acknowledged weaknesses. It would also be a wonderful text for writing workshops and for study groups in church because the topics that come up would inspire good discussions. Young writers would find this book inspiring.

Inchausti has artfully arranged these entries in that they are poignant, brief, and chronological. He has also placed them in chapters that best display their themes: "Writing as a Spiritual Calling"; "The Christian Writer in the Modern World"; "On Poetry"; "On Other Writers"; "On His Own Writing" and "Advice to Writers." These divisions help readers concentrate on dynamics specific to a particular area of writing. The chapter that concerns his own writing, for instance, allows us to see Merton doubting his efforts, facing criticism, and accepting writing as being "deep in my nature."

Some of the more poignant passages Inchausti has excerpted, when they are taken together with similar passages in a variety of works, show Merton in particular spotlights: Merton searching for friendship among famous writers who dared to tell their truths; Merton urging young writers to take

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criticism and write for God; Merton insisting on the purity of language against any deceptions that might mislead a reader or shift the focus onto the false self of the writer. Inchausti includes this quotation from the *Asian Journal*: “True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth. The kind of communication that is necessary on this deep level must also be ‘communion’ beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a ‘preverbal’ level but also on a ‘post-verbal’ level” (76). What is in the background in each of these chapters is the monastic silence that the title refers to. Through this solitude, Merton conveyed what he knew of the search for God as a monk. Here is a final passage that Inchausti includes from “Message of Contemplatives to the World” (1967): “if you dare to penetrate your own silence and risk the sharing of that solitude with the lonely other who seeks God through you, then you will truly recover the light and the capacity to understand what is beyond words and beyond explanations because it is too close to be explained: it is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God’s spirit and your own secret inmost self, so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit” (208).