

Learning to Love - a review of the sixth volume of the complete journals of Thomas Merton

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Thomas Merton. *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*. Ed. with Introduction by Christine M. Bochen. (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997) pp. 382, £19.99. ISBN 0-06-065484-8.

In *Learning to Love*, the penultimate of the seven volumes of Thomas Merton's complete journals we have presented to us the only volume which does not contain any journal material printed previously. With the previous volumes parts of the text were already familiar to the reader with their having been previously published in other journals. In volume six the writing is totally new to the reader, though a large part of its content, Merton's 1966 affair with a student nurse, has been in the common domain since the publication of the biographies of Merton by Michael Mott and John Howard Griffin.

Monica Furlong in her 1980 biography of Merton described 1966 as "a rather quiet time in Merton's life." (1) The subsequent biographies by Mott and Griffin revealed that 1966 had not been quiet but contained one of the most critical and formative events of Merton's monastic life, events recounted in intense detail in *Learning to Love*. This volume although it covers the shortest time span of any of the journals published so far contains as much material as any that has preceded it and this is indicative of the nature and the intensity of that material.

This volume is made up of three separate sources - Merton's daily journal provides the greater part of the material in this volume; an additional account Merton wrote during the summer of 1966 about his relationship with the student nurse called "A Midsummer Diary for M."; and finally a number of entries from "Notebook 17" which cover the beginning of 1966. (Other entries from "Notebook 17" were included in *Dancing in the Water of Life*.) In her introduction to this volume Christine Bochen notes that "A Midsummer Diary for M." was one of two additional accounts Merton kept of his relationship with M. and the other account, entitled "Retrospect", was not made available for publication.

In editing this volume Christine Bochen has divided her material up into four parts: "Being in one place" a short section covering January to March 1966; "Daring to Love" which covers the period of Merton's relationship with M. and his attempt to reconcile himself with his solitary life; "Living love in solitude" which covers September to December 1966 as Merton worked at recommitting himself to his monastic life; "A life free from care" the last section of this journal covers January to October 1967 and presents a picture of Merton living fully his life as a hermit and writer.

It is good at last to be able to read Merton's own account of this period after having read the interpretation of it by his biographers. What would have been really fascinating would be to know what Merton himself would have included if he was editing this journal for publication. As it stands this volume is dominated by Merton's affair with M. The first section, "Being in one place" is very short and then the reader is rocketed into Merton's affair and his journal for a time scarcely contains anything else except his speculations and reflections on their relationship. These reflections continue, though in a much lesser form through the last months of 1966 and into 1967 and at times overshadow some of the excellent journal writing contained in these later passages. With his "Midsummer Diary for M." included as an appendix at the end of this volume the reader is once again thrown into Merton's intense self-examination presenting the danger of this relationship

obscuring the blossoming of a far more mature Merton, partly as a result of this relationship, in the entries from September 1966 through to October 1967. If Merton had prepared this material for publication I think it is this material he would have concentrated on, though by no means to the exclusion of his relationship with M. which he clearly wanted to be known, as Merton himself said in May 1967:

"I have no intention of keeping the M. business entirely out of sight. I have always wanted to be completely open, both about my mistakes and about my effort to make sense out of my life. The affair with M. is an important part of it - and shows my limitations as well as a side of me that is - well, it needs to be known too, for it is part of me." (234.)

In the early entries in *Learning to Love* many of the themes readers have encountered in earlier journals are still present. Prominent in this section is Merton's interest in the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Merton had begun a serious study of Rilke the previous autumn and found in him a like voice. Both men had struggled over their relationships with women and a sense of their inability to love and to be loved. In March 1958 Merton had written that his "worst and inmost sickness is the despair of ever being truly able to love because I despair of ever being worthy of love" (2) and he had also been reflecting on his relationships with women, especially his youthful relationships. Merton had also been struggling with the difference between solitude and loneliness since his move to the hermitage in August 1965 and with thoughts of death as he felt his own physical body deteriorating and as some of his friends from his time at Columbia died. Over the course of this journal all these themes develop in Merton's life and through his relationship with M. he found that he could "love with an awful completeness" (54) that by "abandoning himself to the emptiness" (3) his loneliness was transformed into solitude and that he could face death and the destructive forces in himself as "I no longer fear them, [the destructive forces] as I no longer fear the ardent and loving forces in myself." (304-5) After this period Merton never again spoke of his "inability to love, or to be loved." (4)

This experience filters through into some of Merton's conferences to the monastic community, especially his lectures on Rilke where he speaks of "learning to love" as the hardest of all the tasks in the monastery, and of solitude as central to love. The effect of this relationship and the discoveries Merton made through it are reflected in the remaining journal entries for 1966 and into 1967. After the intense journal entries of March to September 1966 Merton's journal takes on a more open and world-embracing tone as his new sense of love and compassion is extended to the wider world. The authors he was reading in this period make an impressive list - Camus, Eliot, Zukofsky, Muir, Sartre, Faulkner, Jones, Bachelard - and their thought affected his own thought and writing in his final most creative years, including his books *Cables to the Ace*, *The Geography of Lograire*, *Ishi Means Man*, as well as essays on Zen, Camus, Cargo Cults, Faulkner and monastic life.

Readers will find this sixth volume of Merton's journals a veritable contrast to earlier journals, some will love it whilst other will not like the Merton who comes across in its pages. Whatever our reaction it is a part of the whole Merton and a part of the paradoxical figure readers have grown to expect from him.

Footnotes

(1) Monica Furlong. *Merton: A Biography*. (London: Collins, 1980.) 297.

(2) Thomas Merton. *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.) 187.

(3) John Howard Griffin. *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the hermitage years, 1965-1968*. (Fort Worth, Texas: JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983.) 103/4.

(4) Michael Mott. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (London: Sheldon Press, 1984.) 438.

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