

## A Journal Turned Toward a World of Readers: Merton's Private Record and Developing Public Awareness

VICTOR A. KRAMER

EDITING TURNING TOWARD THE WORLD (1960-1963), and study of the other complete journals, most recently *Dancing in the Water of Life* (1963-1965), and *Learning to Live* (1965-1967), make it clear Merton wrote simultaneously as recorder of selected events about his spiritual life, and as an artist fully aware of the need to sort out private issues along with wider concerns in relation to public responsibilities. All this is revealed in this enormous writing project. The complete journal documents this sorting process while it also takes on a unity which Merton realizes he both can and paradoxically should not control.

### Part I: Process

In this paper I amplify one insight to examine parts of the complete journals which demonstrate Merton's prophetic awareness increasingly working on two, and often three, levels. (1) He is primarily concerned about his spiritual development; (2) however, he always is aware what he records in the journals will be read and digested by others later; (3) he often admits he needs to be faithful to facts he might even want to omit. Therefore, while his entries are always exceedingly private, as a literary performance they are so not so much as a retrospective record, but as selections of someone peering years into the future and anticipating readers of this literary project, a literary process which to some degree is taking on a life of its own.

This complete journal records the past while it anticipates future readers who may be able to learn from Merton's experiences. Merton is in process of revealing aspects of his life (which perhaps he might wish to shield) for the benefit of the journal project. This faithfulness is what I call level three. Perhaps this pattern which I suspected,

before I read Volume Six, *Learning to Love*, is most evident there during the two years of 1966 and 1967.

Throughout the journals there are many references to the nature of keeping a journal, and quite significant is an entry made in July, 1956, which reveals Merton's insight into what is occurring just as he starts keeping a journal again after a lapse of three full years:

I have always wanted to write about everything. That does not mean a book that covers everything – which would be impossible, but a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything. That has its own life. A faithful book. I no longer look at it as a "book."<sup>1</sup> (*A Search For Solitude* (S), p.45)

Merton was clearly becoming more aware of the complexity of the process of journal fabrication and its relationship to the readers who would follow as his public life, his literary reputation, and its connections developed. Analysis of his complex awareness of inter-relationships helps us see the complexity of his accomplishments as he watched his journal develop as a private record, but with an awareness of the reading public, and, finally, as his experiment in faithfulness.

Clearly Merton sought, above all, to be faithful to the truth of what he had experienced; yet as a writer he also knew – step by step – that his personal journal was both a record of that experience and a storehouse of materials which would inevitably have an effect upon many readers far in the future. His paradoxical need (as a writer) then became how to document the facts of his spiritual development, a reality which includes moments when one is either discouraged or encouraged as one observes life unfolding over an extended period of time.

### Part II: Project

At the core of Merton's developing project is his systematic honesty. It is what makes these journals as a whole of significance as: raw material reflecting insight into this particular life; as the record of many plans, activities and incipient projects and disappointments which may be read precisely as written; and even more importantly, as Merton's record of actually dealing with the frequent darkness of his spiritual journey. He sensed all of this early, and it is no accident that he was fascinated with the work of St. John of the Cross already in the late 1940s. What Merton had come to recognize, to some

degree like the T. S. Eliot of *Four Quartets*, was that life is always concrete – never theoretical – and therefore his own dark nights and frustrating contradictions had to be experienced, and lived through, and documented. Within that realization (as a born writer) Merton also came to the conclusion that he, therefore, had an obligation to record as much as possible of the honest truth — even if it was often not flattering to himself.

It is arbitrary, and I admit an over-simplification, but I would like to make an observation about how one can divide the complete journals into three basic groups:

(a) 1939-1952 — Pomposity and Certainty: Writing as a record of cleverness.

(b) 1953-1962 — Ambivalence about Self: Writing as a record of doubts.

(c) 1962-1967 — Increasing Honesty: Writing as a record of bold honesty and acceptance.

This is not to say that there is not considerable overlap between these three periods. All aspects are always there. The nature of any journal is to record honestly what one observes. What I want to stress is how Merton's sustained journal project while certainly honest, already at its beginning, is even more so once he realizes that he has a multifold obligation: to write for himself as record of a spiritual journey; to write for posterity; and as writer as honestly as he can manage, even when he does not particularly like what he feels he has to record.

This pattern becomes especially clear in Volumes Three and Four in the middle sections of the project. The beginning period, 1939-1952, is a time of great confidence: conversion, plans to write; vocation; preparation for ordination, etc. These twelve years reflect a certainty about earlier decisions. Less so is this the case at the end of his career: those final seven years from 1962 throughout 1968 reflect with greater and greater intensity Merton's questioning, and even uncertainty about his roles. There were many. He was monk, Novice Master, conference facilitator, editor, hermit, ecumenist, lover, photographer, reader, writer about war, and civil rights, and liturgy. He was poet, etc. All these conflicting roles and pressures make the final years difficult to label because Merton felt the need of doing so

much. We might suggest in a very real sense these were years of turmoil.

In between are what I have labelled the "pivotal years," not so much just 1960-1963, (covered in Volume Four), but the almost decade of awakening, years of awakening from what he called his "dream of separateness" beginning as early as 1952 and 1953 and continuing throughout this middle period. Thus, we have thirty years of journal — three decades and roughly three periods. The first batch are years of confidence. This lasts about fourteen years. The second period is about a decade from 1953 to 1962. The remaining seven years reveal an acute awareness of the need to provide a detailed and complete record and an explosion of interests, contradictions, hopes and disappointments. These three periods are becoming shorter and the writing is becoming more energetic. It seems that there is a need to record honestly which becomes even greater as interests and responsibilities multiply. Merton is deciding to be honest in all kinds of ways that he could not so easily do when he started out with this sustained journal. The middle period of 1953 to 1962 is the moment when Merton, I think, consciously chooses to be unflinchingly honest. William H. Shannon's new book *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works*, divides all of Merton's writing into a similar three part arrangement.

### Part III: Reflections of Honesty

Merton's honesty about (one might say) his honesty becomes one of the most compelling sub-themes of his entire journal project. It is interesting that within *A Search for Solitude*, an entry, for August 18, 1952, he notes (as he is correcting page proofs for *The Sign of Jonas*) that the "Georgia censor" had attacked "the scruple which prompted me to say too many things I did not mean, but which I felt I had to say because they were things I did not like about myself" (S., p.9). Here Merton has been caught in his own observations so to speak.

He then comments about this comment, and this, retrospectively, helps us to understand what he is learning to do throughout his journal project: What one includes cannot just be a record of what one does or doesn't care for, but rather it is much more importantly, a matter of willfulness. Merton notes of the journal writer in general, and of himself:

You have to distinguish what is ugly in you and what is willed by you and what is ugly — or silly — and not willed. The latter is never really interesting, because it is usually quite unreal and therefore not a matter for a journal — gives a false picture. (S., p. 10)

Thus, we can assume that what this ambitious monk-writer often chooses to do as a journal writer past this moment of finishing *The Sign of Jonas* in 1952, and into 1953, is to try in the future to select incidents and details which will provide a "true picture" of what is willed. It is the element of willfulness that is crucial. This is what reveals the tension in the life and what provides the tension in the literary record.

The entries for September 3rd and September 13th, which follow, are especially interesting when studied in the light of these strategic comments. Merton realizes that he functions best in solitude and he wants to be called into more silence; but he also realizes that he cannot easily, either in life or in the journal which reflects his selections about life, separate human "willful" actions and his desire to transcend such venality. In fact he cannot. Luckily, this inextricability makes for very good journal writing and, as well, later, journal reading. Therefore, Merton can in the immediate pages accuse himself of paying too much attention to his scholastics, and therefore, he can, as well, announce he has been making serious mistakes. Thus, he comments, he needs a

Complete new attitude. I have been fooling myself about my 'compassion' for the scholastics — my interest in them is uselessly human, and the job itself, even when most supernatural, is something less than I need and therefore — practically speaking — an obstacle — an occupation that complicates my mind too much for the simplicity of God. (S., p. 15)

But of course what makes such an entry, and all related entries, doubly interesting is the contradiction and suspense. We know retrospectively that Merton kept that job as Master of Scholastics, and a similar one as Novice Master for thirteen more years. The entry is archetypal Merton. His consciousness remains at the center. He follows the preceding comment with a statement about his inability to write a book about St. Bernard: Why to do so, he jokes, would be "as if someone who just made a vow of virginity was told to get married" (S., p. 16). Here we react, "All right, no more such books."

But, of course, we also know that he did write just such a book, *The Last of the Fathers*, and it appeared only two years later.

There is no doubt Merton does often feel caught between his desire for solitude and his hope for experience of the transcendent, along with his also quite strong desire for writing about all this: "real tribulation — ground between millstones" (S., p. 15). What is important, in the present examination of how all this plays into the journal is that he keeps asking questions of himself: Why even write all this down? You do so, he explains, because it may help with one's desired spiritual transformation, but you also do it, he ironically admits, because you've got a contract for other books similar to *The Sign of Jonas*. The recently published correspondence of Merton and James Laughlin, one of his publishers, provides even more evidence of these conflicting concerns.

The entries which follow for September 15th and September 26th are also archetypal Merton, and continue his debate, one which will continue to his death. It is significant that this particular tortuous debate apparently leads to a hiatus of approximately three years for which we have no journal entries. Between September 26, 1952 and March 10, 1953 only seventeen entries survive, and then there is silence until the July 12, 1956 entries which I mentioned earlier (and this is approximately when he assumes a new job as Novice Master).

He apparently feels compelled to write again. Maybe at this moment he thinks he can be drawn more inward because his new job will be primarily spiritual formation, but we know, as journal readers, that his preoccupation with himself and willfulness is the real drama.

Still better and more provocative examples of Merton's consciously choosing to write about his "willfulness" and doing so as honestly as he can manage are the detailed episodes of the years 1966-1967 in *Learning to Love*. This is strong medicine (for Merton and the reader) but it is exactly what allows this journal writer to function on all three levels at once. He had to be honest. He knew the journal would remain in manuscript for twenty-five years after his death, but he suspected it would be published, most likely exactly as he chose to write it. In *Learning to Love* we have the most explicit evidence of Merton's compulsion to be honest about what he is living through, yet also the most extreme example of his wish to put down the facts



not just for his personal benefit but for many other reasons, and ultimately, perhaps most importantly over the long haul, his hopes that all this documentation will be made available for readers decades forward.

The same drive to keep detailed records, not just for self, but for eventual publication is evident in Volume Five, *Dancing in the Water of Life*. He writes on August 16, 1963 of a beautiful "cool, dazzling bright afternoon...an entirely beautiful, transfigured moment of love for God." But note how Merton both praises God and then castigates himself:

...a transfigured moment of love for God and the need for complete confidence in Him, without reserve, even when nothing can be understood. A sense of the continuity of grace in my life and an equal sense of the stupidity and baseness of the infidelities which have threatened to break the continuity. How can I be so cheap and foolish as to trifle with anything so precious? The answer is that I grow dull and stupid and turn in false directions... It is usually a matter of senseless talking, senseless conduct, and vain behaviour... (D., p. 9)

What is interesting about this entry is its tie to the related one following wherein Merton extends his concerns to questions about order within religious life (He is reading Romano Guardini's commentary on Jean Pierre de Caussade.) with regard to "the responsibilities of the individual called by what does not yet exist and called to help it exist in, through, and by a present dislocation of Christian life" (D., p. 10). Merton realizes he cannot know what all this means, yet he feels caught and even confused while he also knows, however, that he must record these particular dislocations.

#### Part IV: A Running Narrative

Merton's journal project is clearly one which fairly early on in its production reflects that he was aware of its many uses, not just for himself, but for others during years to come. Thus the entire project is, on its primary level, a record of selected events which for the writer are of value as a documentation and as a running narrative of a private spiritual journey — troubles, trials, and consternation. To be of use to him these selections have to be accurate and honest and representative of how he felt at particular moments. It is so.

At the same time the writer's process of selection is affected in at least two ways as the journaling occurs. The writer knows, and again fairly early on, that what he chooses as raw material may later be

crafted into other works, for this is precisely what he did in *The Sign of Jonas*, *Secular Journal*, and *Vow of Conversation*. Thus, he chooses (maybe unconsciously to some degree) incidents which will be of literary value later.

However, secondly, Merton, as writer, also knows that there is an extremely good chance that all these "raw" complete journals, will, as well, eventually be published complete. Therefore, he is also writing for readers who will come to his honest record decades or centuries later and therefore absorb the journal entries in their honest completeness, not just as a private spiritual record or as material to be crafted, but as the planned selection of thoughts and events which are (to some degree) valuable and enjoyable precisely because this man of letters saw part of his responsibility as the job of selecting material which would in itself — of itself — provide a compelling narrative because it honestly revealed his willfulness, errors, mistakes, etc.

Merton's function as journal writer, then, works on several levels and more intensely so as he achieves maturity: It is a record of spiritual development, or change. It is also a systematic filing system as are his reading or working notebooks, which he also used for leading into other literary projects. It is finally, however, a depository for Merton's running narrative which he knows must eventually be read as a work which he to some degree consciously planned and consciously wrote to reveal how he (in retrospect) perceived his role as spiritual seeker within the larger context of society, church, monastery, personal relationships, etc., as these events "inexorably moved on towards crisis and mystery" which, of course, most importantly he could not control — yet which in the very act of making a detailed journal for those thirty years he did in fact control as writer.

Many more examples could be provided: one of the most interesting places occurs in *Turning Toward the World* and records the shift observed in late 1961 as the writer becomes more accepting of mystery as he moves into 1962. Another is in 1959, when a disappointing and firm letter arrives from Rome which states he must stay at Gethsemani. He quickly accepts that decision.

Still another example is the somewhat surprising strategy employed throughout the various materials of 1966-1967 including

the private "A Midsummer's Diary for M." (written for his loved one, the nurse) that were later edited as appendix to the journal, *Learning to Love*. Especially in this tumultuous volume, the entries remain exceedingly private; and clearly it is also raw material Merton most likely would have refined. Yet it is always the honest record of Merton's turmoil, seeking, and finding peace, a model for other readers later.

### Notes and References

Parts of this paper have been incorporated in the bibliographical essay which will be included in *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 11, forthcoming.

The page references to the Harper San Francisco Complete Journals are cited within the body of this paper in the following manner:

Volume Three, *A Search for Solitude*, (S);  
Volume Four, *Turning Toward the World*, (T);  
Volume Five, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, (D);  
Volume Six, *Learning to Love*, (L).