

*The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, Thomas Merton. Edited and with an introduction by William H. Shannon. SPCK, 2003. Paperback, 176pp. £9.99 ISBN 0-281-05616-1

ALTHOUGH MANY of Thomas Merton's writings have now been published in the years since he died in 1968, *The Inner Experience* has remained officially unpublished in accordance with his wishes expressed in the Merton Legacy agreement drawn up in 1967. Merton apparently did not want the book published, even after his death. The reason given for its publication now is twofold: despite prohibiting publication in book form, Merton strangely but characteristically allowed for excerpts of the book to be published thereby effectively undermining the ban on publication. The text has been available for some time now, albeit dispersed in various books and journals. Its publication now is justified by way of offering a complete and authorised version of the text. A second reason given is that Merton in 1967 prohibited publication because it still needed revision and that by 1968 he had made further revisions to the text and had begun to circulate it with a view to publication. He gave it to Dan Walsh and wondered what the response would be if it was published. Dan Walsh gave it to some Carmelite Sisters—and they loved it. Nevertheless Merton never gave formal permission for its publication. *The Inner Experience* is essentially a 1959 rewrite of a shorter publication he wrote in 1948 called *What Is Contemplation?* with the minor alterations and additions made in 1968. The three dates of writing are indicated in the text by the use of different typefaces potentially offering an easy way to see how Merton's thought has developed over the twenty years 1948-1968. The book is presented as a kind of 'bridge' between the 'early' Merton and the 'later' Merton. The

famous 'epiphany' on the corner of Fourth and Walnut occurred in March 1958, when his eyes were opened to his basic oneness with all humanity. This book can therefore be considered as Merton's initial attempt to revisit his early thinking on contemplation in the light of this world-embracing vision. He had also recently begun his correspondence with the Zen scholar, D.T. Suzuki. *The Inner Experience* therefore represents the same type of rethink that produced *New Seeds of Contemplation* but, I would argue, with less effect.

Two questions therefore recurred for me as I read the book: Why did Merton not want this book published? And how has his thought developed over the twenty-year period? I am not at all convinced that this book in itself reveals very much about Merton's development. The 1948 passages are certainly cruder and less-developed than the bulk of the text written in 1959 but Merton has kept them in and so, presumably, is prepared to stand by them. Except for not wanting the book published. The 1968 revisions do not alter or add to the 1959 text to any significant degree. This would suggest that perhaps Merton's thought had not developed as much as people like to think. However I return to the fact that, at the very least, Merton had major reservations over the publication of this book.

The subtitle of the book, 'Notes on Contemplation,' is an accurate description of its style and content. Topics are partially ordered but are open-ended and sometimes flow seamlessly, if not chaotically, into one another—stream of consciousness rather than logical order. You could read the various chapters and sections in almost any order.

In discussing 'the contemplative life' Merton is trying to convey something of a way of being and experiencing reality

that is beyond concepts and symbols—and even words. It is an impossible task. As he says elsewhere, everything that is said about contemplation immediately has to be withdrawn, qualified and contradicted. There is certainly no shortage of apparent contradictions and tensions within this book. And Merton is perhaps not at his best when he is trying to write in abstract and general terms. He has a tendency to over generalise and resort to caricature—'thousands of Christians walking about the face of the earth bearing in their bodies the infinite God of whom they know practically nothing,' or the arrival of the TV addict in the monastery. The examples could be multiplied. Many times whilst reading the text I was forced to pause and ask myself, 'Hold on a minute—how does he know that?' At other times there was a sense that the general and abstract was veiling something concrete and specific, and that he would have been much better therefore to speak in such terms.

Thomas Merton is a writer for whom, because of his journals and letters, it is possible to contextualise what he writes. Having *The Inner Experience* in its present form with its informative introduction and editing by William Shannon helps us to do this. Many times in the course of reading the book I had the sense that Merton was describing himself or expressing the struggles and tensions in his own spiritual life and the practicalities of being a monk at Gethsemani. Many times I had the sense that although Merton was saying things in categorical terms, he was actually wrestling with the questions himself. Hence the contradictions and changes of direction.

However, this is Thomas Merton we are talking about—and Merton on a bad day is a hundred times better than most other spiritual writers at their best. There are undoubtedly many good and helpful passages in this book. The reader is forced to engage with the paradox

between not struggling and legitimate struggle in the spiritual life. Merton engages with some real dialogue with 'the East' (particularly in Chapter 2) and with existentialism, Freud, Marx and the secular culture of his time. For me the least satisfactory chapter was the one on 'Christian Contemplation' which I found overly long and which I felt got bogged down in involved discussion of abstract Patristic theology and the uncritical adoption of some of its more primitive ideas—for example, the division of the sexes as a product of the Fall. Even here what came through was the typically Mertonian idea of us becoming 'other Christs' to one another, borrowing the patristic formula that God became what we are in order that we may become what he is. But the thing about the book that surprised me most was that paradoxically *because* it is not perfect, and *because* Merton said things I didn't agree with, it made me think things through and enter into a dialogue in a way which I would not have done if the book had been better constructed or better written, or had not offended my sensibilities. Typical Merton.

So *The Inner Experience* should come with a health warning—which it does really. It is not a book that I would necessarily have chosen to read but it is one that I am glad I have read. As Merton himself says, 'you may even find yourself having to read the thing whether it fits in with your plans or not.' Those who have not read any Merton before should not begin here—better to start with his journals or *The Sign of Jonas*. Those who want to learn more about the contemplative life would be better advised to get hold of Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton did not want *The Inner Experience* published, and I think he was right. It wasn't ready and he knew it. I would not have published it—but I am grateful for its publication now!