

Why Not Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*?

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When Thomas Merton's name arises inevitably his best-selling autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (hereafter SSM) is mentioned. For many it was their 'first Merton'. It is often suggested when, faced with Merton's massive bibliography, someone asks 'what should I read first?' SSM's publication was certainly timely. With the world in recovery after WWII, a book which borrowed its structure from Dante's *Purgatorio* was apt. Today I question it as a 'first Merton'. Don't misunderstand. I do not intend to demean the autobiography. It is an engaging, well written, uplifting account that has helped many and will probably rank as a 20th century spiritual classic. I question its choice for a 'first Merton' for three reasons: the nature of autobiography; Merton's age when he wrote it, and that he later found it rather embarrassing.

Autobiography chronicles a person's life written by him or her self. Spiritual autobiography describes the encounter with God. Both pose interesting challenges for a reader. The writer is subject and shaper of both life and text. The reader is faced not only with 'selective memory', but an author's (conscious or unconscious) tension between telling and describing, making and discovering. That I have infinite capacity for self-deception does not mean an autobiographer does, but it leads me to wonder what version of a self is revealed.

For example, Merton wrote in the Epilogue of SSM that a 'double, this writer... followed me into the cloister. ... Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.'¹ But Merton continued to write and write and write, including in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 'Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.'² (Italics mine.)

What of Merton after 1948? I hesitate to offer SSM as a first Merton book because it is the autobiography of a young man *and* a relatively newly minted monk. Its manuscript was first sent to his literary agent Naomi Burton Stone in 1946. It was written some years before publication in 1948 when Merton was 33 years old and had made solemn vows only the previous year. By his death in 1968 Merton was a very different person. (Remember the changes that occurred in the United States between 1948 and 1968.)

Later, Merton found SSM, if not embarrassing, certainly callow. On

June 13th, 1951 he recorded in his journal: 'I have become very different from what I used to be. ... the man who finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* when this journal began was also dead ... dead over and over.'³ Three years after its publication Merton was uncomfortable with SSM. On April 2nd, 1965 he wrote of SSM to Mrs. Mycock: 'My thought at the time of writing was hardly matured.'⁴

In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, edited before his death, Merton drew a verbal cartoon of himself in SSM: '... due to a book I wrote thirty years ago, I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative - the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse.'⁵ In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) Merton depicted himself as a 'bystander'. William Shannon observed that when Merton 'came to the monastery, he left behind an *understanding of himself*.'⁶ Gethsemani changed Merton. He outgrew his pre-Vatican II triumphalism. Over the years, like the snake in his hermitage outhouse, he shed several 'skins'.

Spiritual autobiographies are written by people who, metaphorically, have 'died and returned'. Merton admitted that SSM became the book of a dead man. Later writing chronicles his post-resurrection wisdom. In Part VI of his poem 'Words For Music Perhaps', William Butler Yeats observed that suffering can be an opportunity for insight and wisdom: 'For nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent.' The SSM mainly depicts Merton's 'rending'. Later writing records the healing and wholeness which resulted from his Trappist life.

I'm uneasy with SSM as 'first Merton' because it depicts the 'death' in detail, but only hints at the following resurrected life. The SSM is a splendid example of spiritual autobiography *especially* at the outset of the journey. The good news is that the remainder of Merton's journey is chronicled extensively in letters, journals, and non-autobiographical writing.

Christianity's blueprint is the life of Jesus who died to bring Life. Historically its spirituality indicates insight is often preceded by 'death' or 'dark nights'. Spiritual autobiographers consider their experience typical, normative, and write to encourage others, to shine light in darkness. Merton observed that 4th century Desert Christians fled to the desert 'to be themselves, their *ordinary* selves.' They saved themselves 'to pull the whole world to safety after them.'⁷ This can also be observed in

Merton's life. Every life is potentially a template of salvation history because each is potentially the locus of encounter with Divinity, This we learn from the more mature Merton.

Notes

1. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1970), pp. 496-497.
2. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961/1972), p. 34.
3. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. Two, 1941-1952*, Jonathan Montaldo (ed.) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 458.
4. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom – Letters in Times of Crisis*, William H Shannon (ed.) (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), p. 319.
5. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image Books, 1973), p. 159.
6. William H. Shannon, 'Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 76. Italics in original.
7. Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 23 Italics in original.

Bonnie Thurston resigned a Chair and Professorship in New Testament to live quietly in her home state of West Virginia. Author or editor of twenty-four theological books and eight collections of poetry, she contributes to scholarly and popular periodicals. Her doctoral dissertation was one of the first on Thomas Merton. She was a founder of the International Thomas Merton Society, and its third president. She is an avid reader, cook, gardener, walker, and classical music lover.