

true in the case of writers such as Schwartz and Jarrell who move toward tragic ends. We read their letters with an awareness that a certain inevitability is at work. Despite all appearances—all plans, hopes, and wishes expressed in these letters—we know what will happen. We see a writer such as Jarrell, with his abundant gifts, his many friends, his zest for living, and—viewing him just two years before his death—wonder that he could commit suicide. We see a writer like Schwartz—consider the horrors of his final two decades—and marvel that he did not.

*Fred Hobson*

## A Monk Sacred and Profane

*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton.* By Michael Mott. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984. 690 pp. \$24.95.

There is something uncanny about this official biography of Thomas Merton. Like all good biography, it works well and, despite its bulk and detail, thoroughly absorbs and carries the reader through the hopes, struggles and achievements of this humanist-turned-monk. Yet in the end, the reader—and reviewer—are hard pressed to state exactly why the book works as well as it does.

There are no immediately evident special features about Mott's telling of Merton's life. He has been criticized for failing to provide a central theme or unifying analysis for the richly divergent data of Merton's thoughts and deeds. Indeed, in this almost overwhelming assemblage of information, there is little interpretation or commentary and few penetrating insights from the biographer. As the official biographer appointed by Merton's trustees, Mott had advantages over others, but he also faced greater difficulties and much higher expectations. Besides the trustees, he is the only person who has had full access to Merton's unpublished writings, including eighteen hundred folders of letters and the private journals from 1956 to 1968 (which, however, cannot be directly quoted until 1990). So while Mott had the means to put together a definitive account of Merton's life, he also faced the formidable task of selecting and ordering this mountain of information. To this task, he brought no special training or experience. He is himself not a biographer but a poet and novelist. Unlike most other Merton commentators, he neither knew Merton personally, nor was he previously a Merton fan; nor is he Roman Catholic. He undertook not a work of literary or scholarly passion, but an assignment.

But passion grew and the assignment turned out to be a splendid example of the art of biography—to the point that even an intimate and long-standing friend of Merton, Robert Giroux, could call it “a revelation.” Again, why? In the final analysis, it is the person of Merton that makes this biography work

—*plus* the way Mott enables that person to stand forth with a clarity and complex completeness not found in any other study of Merton or in any of his writings. Mott himself does not fashion this clarity or completeness; he lets it happen. This is the skill of the poet-turned-biographer—to assemble the data so that the reader can not only see the life and stature of this man but also share his hopes and struggles. After completing the book, I reread the preface and realized how well Mott succeeded in his preannounced goal: “I have tried for a work of balance that will present things fairly and leave the reader to decide” (p. xxv).

Crucial to the revelation that Mott makes possible are Merton’s private journals. Only eight years old when he began a journal of sorts, Merton was to continue this self-analytic practice for the rest of his life. These private journals were not only the source from which he mined many of his books; they were also, in Mott’s words, the means by which “. . . he sought the ground of his own being beyond everything that was false . . . the journals would speak of him without editing, crossings-out, polishing—a place where the narrow-minded, or those who had made a cult of him, would founder, and where the seekers of truth without pretense would find him” (pp. 93, 458). Skillfully and delicately, Mott weaves the dominant threads of these journals into his presentation of the stages and especially the writings of Merton’s life; the result is an always clearer, and sometimes a very different, picture of what Merton was about. This is especially the case in the way Mott juxtaposes the mythic, heroic grandeur of *The Seven Storey Mountain* with the ordinary and earthy reality of the journals, showing how Merton was wont to exaggerate the noble or cloak the unsavory aspects of his search. In the journals, the noble pilgrim retains his feet of clay. Mott does not hesitate, occasionally, to deflate explicitly Merton’s exaggerations or correct his narrow-mindedness, pointing out, for instance, how he was “plainly wrong” in his bickering judgments of his abbot, Dom James (p. 353) or how he “came too close, too early, to the belief that [Martin Luther] King’s non-violence had failed” (p. 392). Yet throughout this sobering picture of the real Merton, the reader clearly senses the biographer’s respect and admiration, indeed his downright love, for his subject.

Yet if Mott reveals the complete, the real Merton, why is it that the picture of this man and monk is so attractive, bewitching, or simply so interesting? Indeed, the biography continues, and intensifies, the spell that Merton has worked on young and old over the last two generations. This spell will, of course, be felt and understood differently. For me, the book has finally clarified what is the substance, the nucleus, of Merton’s polyvalent, attractive force. In Merton, as Mott reveals him, one sees and feels the profundity, the excitement, the beauty of a life in which the *sacred and profane* have met and wrestled and embraced. Throughout his life, in varying rhythms and progression, Merton embodied a dynamic, dialectical unity-in-difference between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, the spirit and the flesh. He illustrated and suffered the scholastic adage of his Roman tradition—*gratia*

*supponit naturam*—grace presupposes nature, the divine embraces and fulfills the human, the spirit is not real outside of the flesh. To plunge into the profane is to discover the sacred; to flee to the sacred is to be thrown back into the profane—this is the story of Merton's life and the source of its power and inspiration for so many contemporaries.

The overall pattern of Merton's life, as Mott tells it, is a continual bouncing back and forth between, and a merging of, the sacred and profane. His youth and early manhood were immersed in the world with all its delightful and perplexing profanities—the pleasures of the mind and of the senses (and the complications of fathering an illegitimate child). Merton was known as a hard thinker and a hard drinker, qualities he never lost. But the deeper he plunged into the world as he knew it, the more he felt pulled in other directions. There followed his conversion to Catholicism, his attempts to enter the priesthood (rejected by the Franciscans because of his too profane past life!), and finally his coming home, in 1941, to the Trappist Monastery of Gethsemani—"the center of America" (p. 172). His best selling *Seven Storey Mountain* records his newfound delights in cutting himself off from the world and immersing himself in the silent austerity of *solī Deo*—for God alone.

But the pendulum was to swing again. By the end of the 1950s, saturated in the spirit, Merton was "waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness." He returned to the world and "the Human Race" (p. 311) with a vengeance, launching a literary avalanche of social and political commentary and protest. He refers to this rebirth to concerns of war and peace and racial justice as "the turning point in my spiritual life" (p. 374). The mystic-turned-critic spoke with a boldness that was not always endearing: "The next time I hear anything about the iniquity of Castro and the righteousness of the United States, I am going to throw a bowl of soup at somebody (p. 367). . . . The psychology of the Alabama police becomes in fact the psychology of America as world policeman (p. 415). . . . One would certainly wish that the Catholic position on nuclear war was held as strict as the Catholic position on birth control" (p. 377).

But as Merton plunged on into the tangle of Vietnam, nuclear war, non-violence, and racial justice, he became aware of "the violence of his own enthusiasm" (p. 380) and the "feeling that activism without discipline . . . was in danger of devouring itself, a dragon eating its own tail" (p. 144). So during these same "profane" years, he was searching the mysticism of the East and, more so, searching for a more radical distance from the world. After a long, bitter battle with his abbot, he finally received permission to live as a hermit on monastery property (and soon afterwards complained that his fellow monks were ignoring him!). During these years of beloved solitude Merton was to face the most personal and bewildering reminder of how much spirit cannot abandon flesh. During a stay in the hospital in Louisville, the fifty-one-year-old monk fell in love with a young nurse. There followed a clandestine romance in which Merton admitted "he had been like a drunken driver, taking

one red light after another" (p. 439) and in which he recognized that sex is "something I gave up without having come to terms with it" (p. 83). A love journal written especially for "S" resulted and made clear, in Mott's words, that "sometimes we learn great wisdom in loving unwisely" (p. 438). With a new abbot who had greater trust in his behavior outside the monastery, he prepared for a new move into the world—his trip to the Orient where he would search for new "markings" in other cultures and Eastern mysticism (p. 543) and where he would meet his untimely death.

Mott's biography succeeds so splendidly because it portrays so amply and lucidly the fragile but creative unity-in-difference that marked Merton's life and that gave him his extraordinary power of attracting and inspiring. Merton—the mystical activist, the prolific writer in pursuit of silence, the hermit in the midst of the world, the Zen Christian, the celibate lover, the recluse who kept his jazz and Bob Dylan records—persuades us that unless we seek after some such unity-in-difference, we miss the mystery and beauty of being human.

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## Imagining America

*Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime.* By Elizabeth McKinsey. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985. xvi + 331 pp. Notes and index. \$34.50.

*American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper.* J. A. Ward. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985. xvii + 210 pp. Index. \$20.00.

Since the early republic, American painters and writers have explored and sought to express what they imagined America to be. Among our most sensitive and articulate intellectuals, their work has provided insight into our strengths and weaknesses and how we have changed as a people. Their images have been, on the whole, so evocative and convincing that twentieth-century scholars have at times fallen victim to the fallacy of equating literary and artistic images of America with America itself. Highly personal works have been interpreted, not as imaginative and sensitive individual expressions, but as indices of a monolithic "American mind." Two recent books, Elizabeth McKinsey's *Niagara Falls* and Joseph A. Ward's *American Silences*, illustrate well the values and the limitations of such "American Studies." Both authors examine the work of writers and painters in an effort to identify important features of American consciousness. Their descriptions and analyses are careful and, at times, provocative; yet, each overstates the broader cultural implications of their findings.