

# The Irony of Thomas Merton: Raids on the Unthinkable

Editorial by Patrick Jamieson, Victoria

It was Thomas Merton's *Sign of Jonas* that lead to my spiritual awakening as such. I shared a room with my older brother and he was heading out with his pals for a Friday evening run. I don't know if I was even that interested in going with him, but he threw me a book to read by "that guy Thomas Merton." He also introduced me in a similar off handed manner to the music of Bob Dylan, but that is another story.

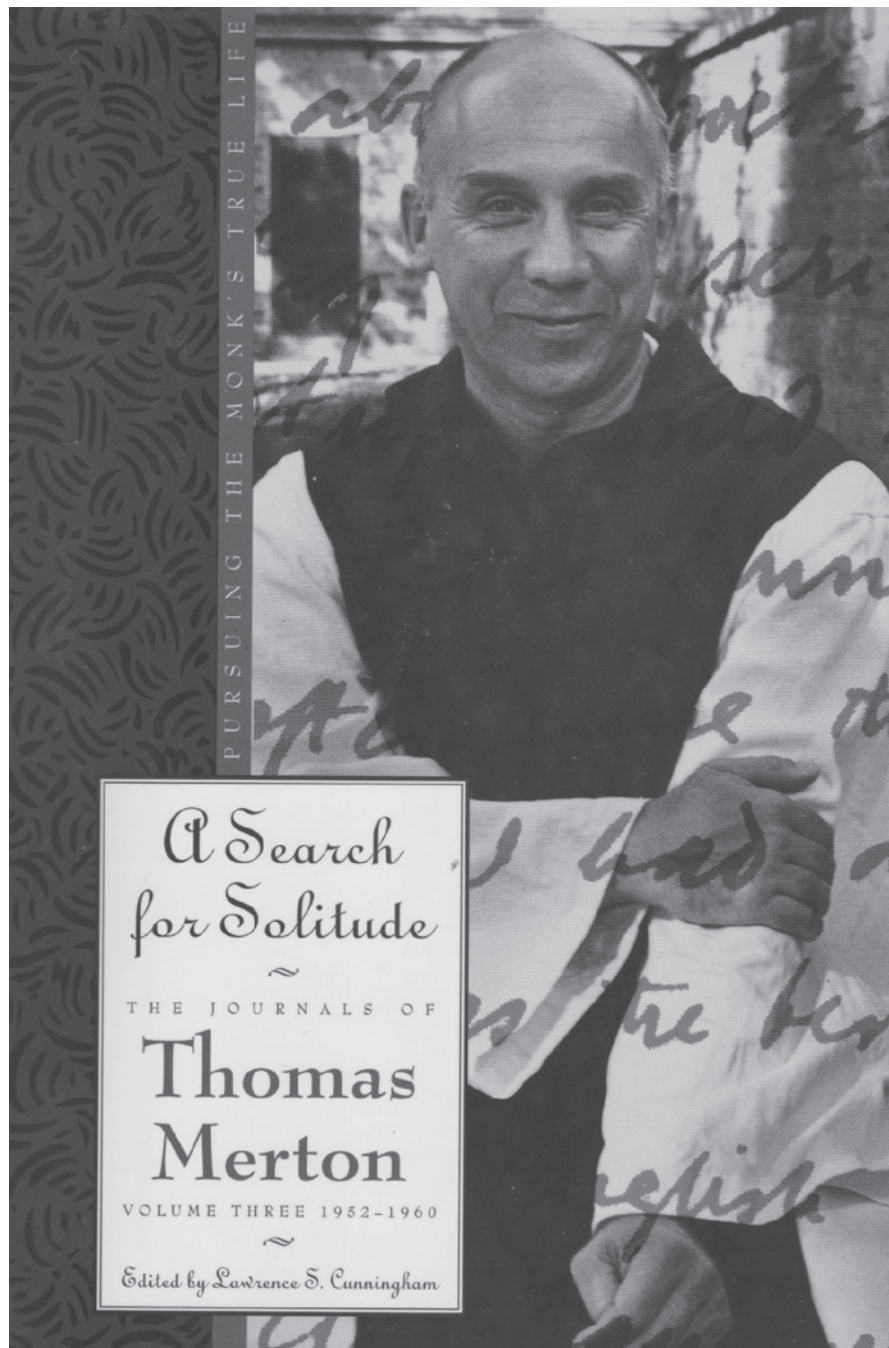
Even though *Sign of Jonas* was the sort of book that writes itself naturally as a diary of the day to day life in a Trappist monastery, as Merton described it, it held the rapt attention of a fourteen year old. I would say that encounter with the mind of Merton set me off on a lifelong path. And that in itself may have been a good or bad thing, as that same brother would put it.

To me that was the power of Thomas Merton, his voice, his writing style and capacity to communicate about profound things in a friendly accessible manner.

It wasn't a one time event. He seemed to keep pace with all my personal interests and changes. More likely he formed them. From spiritual autobiography to personal religious spirituality to social commentary to avante garde aesthetic reflections to political radicalism. Perhaps I would have taken that path anyway but if he did not form my seeking sensibility he totally reinforced it.

Intuitively I would seek out his new works in bookstores and when I held them in my hands I could deeply sense a new stage and era could well be upon me.

I am sure this is the way Merton affected so many people. He seemed to appeal to people across many diverse sensibilities. I can remember attending Thomas Merton Society events where the range of Catholic Christian sensibilities was truly



amazing.

Books that he later all but disowned were seen as the greatest ones in the mind of the presenter. I had trouble containing my amusement. I had a sense there and then that trouble was on the horizon to unite all these types of followers. The early conservative Merton clashing with the later socially progressive, etc.

I think what David Martin writes

about on pages 6 and 7 of this issue lies in this region of almost too much diversity and the sort of appropriation that takes place where a favourite writer is concerned.

Martin and his fellow author of *The Martyrdom of Thomas Merton* are shocked at the reception they have received by the keepers of the Holy Grail of Merton Orthodoxy. He surely would be amused. Well, bemused at least.

These more than earnest fellows who feel they have something important to share have shown up at the banquet in the wrong cloak. Too much time has passed for fresh revelations to be welcome. Whole theories have been worked out based on false information. Its like trying to prove Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare when a whole industry has been built up around unsubstantiated information.

The fact that William Shaksper of Stratford on Avon was probably illiterate and all the dates and data of the plays perfectly fits the life and personality of Edward de Vere, the Sixth Earl of Oxford doesn't stir a whit of concern. As the scripture passage says, even if a man should rise from the dead nothing would convince them.

Happily it is only 50 years since Merton's death/murder/martyrdom, not five hundred as in the case of The Bard. Martin and Turley's new information will eventually be accepted but it is still a painful and puzzling going if not galling across what we call the Catholic culture wars.

'Nothing's going to change my world,' sang the Beatles fully aware of the irony that what we hold fast condemns us in time, as poor olde Don Cherry has recently realized, hopefully.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Thomas Merton joked about the James Joyce Industry and how so much academic work was generated by discoveries about Joyce's life and how it affected his timeless prose. Now Merton's own journey, the details of his life and death have become the subject of a similar industry with charges of industrial sabotage issued against new and pertinent revelations. May the Truth emerge from this fray unsullied.

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