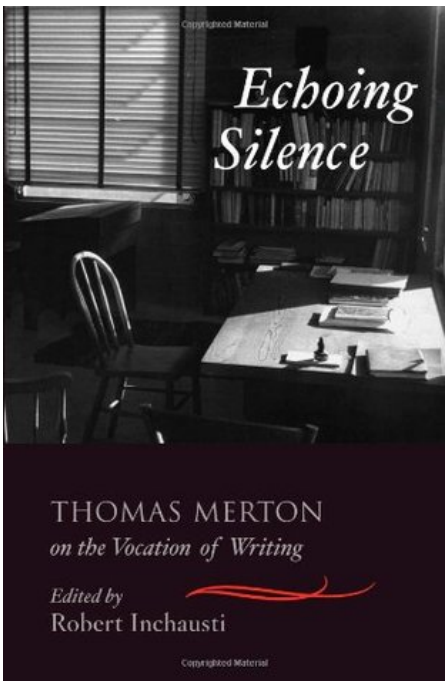

Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing

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Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing Details

Date	:	Published February 13th 2007 by New Seeds
ISBN	:	9781590303481
Author	:	Thomas Merton , Robert Inchausti (Editor)
Format	:	Paperback 215 pages
Genre	:	Language, Writing, Nonfiction, Spirituality, Religion, Theology, Autobiography, Memoir, Philosophy

From Reader Review Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing for online ebook

Sophfronia Scott says

I picked up this book because I love how Thomas Merton in his other writings speaks of the word "vocation"-- how it fits in a person's life and what it means to find one's vocation. I was eager to see what he had to say on the subject in terms of writing because he was so prolific and quite gifted. But I was disappointed to find this book is a compilation of bits and pieces from Merton's books, essays, and letters. While I found helpful, even inspiring, parts here and there it's not the same as Merton having intentionally written an actual book on the vocation of writing. I'm sure such a book would have been more thoughtful, more focused, and less truncated. I read it all the way through, but one can just as easily, especially if you've read Merton's other works, flip through it and enjoy what you wish.

Luke Storms says

Publisher Comments:
When Thomas Merton entered a Trappist monastery in December 1941, he turned his back on secular life--including a very promising literary career. He sent his journals, a novel-in-progess, and copies of all his poems to his mentor, Columbia professor Mark Van Doren, for safe keeping, fully expecting to write little, if anything, ever again. It was a relatively short-lived resolution, for Merton almost immediately found himself being assigned writing tasks by his Abbot--one of which was the autobiographical essay that blossomed into his international best-seller The Seven Storey Mountain. That book made him famous overnight, and for a time he struggled with the notion that the vocation of the monk and the vocation of the writer were incompatible. Monasticism called for complete surrender to the absolute, whereas writing demanded a tactical withdrawal from experience in order to record it. He eventually came to accept his dual vocation as two sides of the same spiritual coin and used it as a source of creative tension the rest of his life. Merton's thoughts on writing have never been compiled into a single volume until now. Robert Inchausti has mined the vast Merton literature to discover what he had to say on a whole spectrum of literary topics, including writing as a spiritual calling, the role of the Christian writer in a secular society, the joys and mysteries of poetry, and evaluations of his own literary work. Also included are fascinating glimpses of his take on a range of other writers, including Henry David Thoreau, Flannery O'Connor, Dylan Thomas, Albert Camus, James Joyce, and even Henry Miller, along with many others.

Amy Moritz says

It took me far too long to finish this book. I'm not entirely sure why I put it down. I think in part because I became engrossed in other books. In part because this is a book about Merton's thoughts on the vocation of writing and, well, I had let my current project slide. Reading this was a reminder of what I was failing to do.

But enough of that.

I love Thomas Merton. Love, love, love him. I turn to his works for guidance and particularly post-election 2016 feel the need to read his work to find my center in a world gone nutty.

This is a curated collection, taking pieces of previously published work along with sections from letters, etc. It's not a coherent read, which is one reason I was able to take so long with it.

Merton at times is far too smart for me to understand. Other times he hits me right at my core. Still other times he just makes me laugh. Here are parts I loved:

"There exists for me a particular goal, a fulfillment which must be all my own - nobody else's - & it does not really identify that destiny to put it under some category - 'poet,' 'monk,' 'hermit.' Because my own individual destiny is a meeting, an encounter with God that He has destined for me alone."

"This idea of a 'writing career' which begins somewhere and ends somewhere is also a beautifully stupid fiction."

"Advice? I would say that there is one basic idea that should be kept in mind in all the changes we make in life, whether of career or anything else. We should decide not in view of better pay, higher rank, 'getting ahead,' but in view of becoming more real, entering more authentically into direct contact with life, living more as a free and mature human person, able to give myself more to others, able to understand myself and the world better."

"I think we have to be very careful of our honesty and our refusal to be swept away by large groups, into monolithic systems. We have to guard and defend our eccentricity even when we are reminded that it is an expendable luxury, a self-indulgence. It is not."

"How can he really 'find himself' if he plays a role that society has predetermined for him?"

"Wisdom is not only speculative, but also practical: that is to say, it is 'lived.' And unless one 'lives' it, one cannot 'have' it."

"We all have to try to be fifty different people. ... The result is the painful, sometimes paranoid sense of being always under observation, under judgement, for not fulfilling some role or other way we have forgotten we were supposed to fulfill."

"We are already one. But we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. WHAT WE HAVE TO BE IS WHAT WE ARE." (emphasis mine)

"Violence changes nothing. But love changes everything."

"We will triumph. God is with the poets."

"Imperfection is the penalty of rushing into print. And people who rush into print too often do so not because they really have anything to say, but because they think it is important for something by them to be in print."

"I am old, well, middle-aged. But let me encourage you with your book and with your writing, because it sounds right for you, and this is what you should do."

"As long as one imagines himself to be accomplishing something, he tends to become rich in his own eyes. But we must be poor, and live by God alone - whether we write or whatever else we may do."

"Your Bro. Bonaventure seized me violently in the Prior's room and recited to me some very bad poetry

which, in the heat of the moment, I managed to recognize as being by me."

"I feel in fact immensely poor and fallible but don't worry about it. Just live."

"When one gets older ... one realizes the futility of a life wasted in argument when it should be given entirely to love."

"If a writer is so cautious that he never writes anything that cannot be criticized, he will never write anything that can be read. If you want to help other people you have got to make up your mind to write things that some men will condemn."

"No writer who has anything important to say can avoid being opposed and criticized."

Ali M. says

This isn't a book about the art and craft of writing, which threw me off at first. It really is about writing as a *vocation* – an occupational calling. Specifically, it is a posthumous collection of letters and excerpts that outline Merton's attitudes toward writing, its place in the world, and its place in his own life.

That attitude shifts and changes *a lot* over the course of Merton's life as a Trappist monk (and, later, a student of Zen). Since the letters in each section are arranged chronologically, it was fascinating to trace his evolution from someone in love with asceticism and all it has to offer on a spiritual level, to someone who is at odds with his fellow Catholics – especially the authorities and the censors within his own tradition.

As he says in one of the book's later letters:

> "There are by and large two Mertons: one ascetic, conservative, traditional, monastic. The other radical, independent, and somewhat akin to beats and hippies and to poets in general. Neither one of these appeals to the current pace-setters for Catholic thought and life in the U.S. today. Some of them respect me, others think I'm nuts, none of them really dig me."

Merton disparages his own writing a lot in his letters, wishing that he hadn't published much of it. But it's interesting that he says the one work he really stands by is New Seeds of Contemplation – which is by far my favorite of his books, and the one that has had the most profound effect on my own life. I'm constantly returning to it.

One other thought of his that struck me: "When one gets older, one realizes the futility of a life wasted in argument when it should be given entirely to love." Couldn't agree more, brother.

Jsavett1 says

I enjoyed this DEEPLY. I've read myriad books on the "vocation of writing" as well as about the techniques, mind-set, and aesthetic ideals of poetry and poets. But this book is different. I was particularly interested in

the section regarding poetry. Merton discusses the need for poets to be outside of the cloister. How they might sometimes be leading a saintly life by NOT leading a traditionally religious life at all. He describes poetry writing as analogous to prophesy and prayer and eventually comes to this jewel:

"All really valid poetry is a kind of recovery of paradise.....the living line and generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. The reader get a new chance in hope, in imagination...why? Because the language gets a new chance."

Finally, in the section "On Other Writers," Merton provides some very interesting insights into Camus's absurdity and his rage against darkness.

Maria says

"Echoing Silence" by Thomas Merton is actually a compilation of his writings from 1948 until his death on the 'vocation of writing.' While he had begun writing as a teenager, it was his struggle with integrating "the demanding integrity of art into the even more demanding integrity of Christian asceticism" that is reflected in the excerpts in this book.

Thomas Merton converted to Catholicism in 1938 and joined a Trappist order in 1941 and as a monk, Merton thought his writing career was over. But as the book reveals, he continued to write in the monastery as part of his morning meditation and was even given writing assignments by the abbot. The resulting set of autobiographical essays entitled "The Seven Storey Mountain" was published in 1948 and became a hit. Far from pleasing him, this public success troubled him deeply and many of his journal entries reflect his skepticism about what he perceived as the incompatibility of his literary life and his vocation as a monk. He writes, for example, "The artist enters into himself in order to work. But the mystic enters into himself, not in order to work but to pass through the center of his soul and lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite, transcendent reality of God living and working within him."
In another instance, he writes, "I can no longer see the ultimate meaning of a man's life in terms of either 'being a poet' or 'being a contemplative' or even in a certain sense in 'being a saint...It must be something more immediate than that. I -- and every other person in the world -- must say: 'I have my own special, peculiar destiny which no one else ever has had or ever will have...'"

As a result of reading the literature of mystics such as Saint John of the Cross and others, Merton came to see that the mystic and the artist were not mutually exclusive callings. In a journal entry in 1949, he writes, "I am finding myself forced to admit that my lamentations about my writing job have been foolish. At the moment the writing is the one thing that gives me access to some real silence and solitude. Also I find that it helps me to pray because, when I pause at my work, I find that the mirror inside me is surprisingly clean and deep and serene and God shines there and is immediately found, without hunting, as if He had come close to me while I was writing and I had not observed His coming. And this I think should be the cause of great joy, and to me it is."

From this point on, his writing takes on a personal candor and a clarity that causes the reader to pause and contemplate practically every sentence he writes. Always the contemplative, much of his writing turns into a social critic -- but a social critic who was grounded theologically and who possessed an apocalyptic vision of the world. He writes, "I am definitely not a harmonious part of this society." In this section, his writing reflects someone feeling at odds with the world.

In a subsequent section of the book, Merton takes on our culture's use and overuse of the term "creativity." Merton writes, "We must begin by facing the ambivalence which makes for much of our talk about creativity absurd because it is fundamentally insincere...The popular use of the word creativity is so facile that one feels immediately that is is a pure evasion...When everything is "creative," nothing is creative. But nowadays everything is called creative: we have creative salesmanship, meaning probably obnoxiously aggressive and vulgar salesmanship."
He embarks in a beautifully written section on the true meaning of creativity: he explores the Zen approach to art. "The chief thing about Zen in its relation to art is precisely that the 'artist,' the 'genius as hero,' completely vanishes from the scene. There is no self-display, because the 'true self', which functions in Zen experience, is empty, invisible, and incapable of being displayed." He then explores creativity from a Christian perspective, and he writes, "Since there is no genuine creativity apart from God, the man who attempts to be a 'creator' outside of God and independent of him is forced to fall back on magic...The dignity of man is to stand before God on his own feet, alive, conscious, alert to the light that has been placed in him, and perfectly obedient to that light."

Just randomly turning a page, my eyes fall on another powerful entry, written in 1963: "The Negro spirituals of the last century remain as classic examples of what a living liturgical hymnody ought to be, and how it comes into being: not in the study of the research worker or in the monastery library, still less in the halls of Curial offices, but where men suffer oppression, where they are deprived of identity, where their lives are robbed of meaning, and where the desire of freedom and the imperative demand of truth forces them to give it meaning: a religious meaning. Such religion is not the 'opium of the people,' but a prophetic fire of love and courage, fanned by the breathing of the Spirit of God who speaks to the heart of His children in order to lead them out of bondage." Just beautiful! There are no facile or narrow interpretations of religion or of Christianity with Merton. I have always been amazed that Christianity is really lived -- experienced in this way -- wherever people have been persecuted. Some of the most profound modern writings on Orthodox Christianity came out of the Soviet Union when the Church was under siege, either because it had been compromised or because it was persecuted. People like Alexander Men who was brutally murdered, exhibited the true Christian spirit of courage and love in their lives and in their writings.

In another more scathing moment, he writes, "Men do not agree in moral reasoning. they concur in the emotional use of slogans and political formulas. There is no persuasion but that of power, of quantity, of pressure, of fear, of desire. Such is our present condition--and it is critical!" He could be writing today.

The trouble with writing a review about this book is that because it affected me so profoundly and on so many levels, I am at a loss to know how to capture the essence of the book. It is a book that is meant to be dipped into, savored, and ultimately returned to. The truth is, I have not really "finished reading" the book. There is a way in which one does not read the book consecutively from cover to cover. There is no plot or overarching structure here other than a man's life-long pursuit of self-knowledge, God, truth, and love. Merton's writings invite one to contemplation, rather than action; to turning inward and finding that "mirror" he refers to early on...that brings one face to face, not with oneself, but with God.It is not surprising that on his journey, Merton also paused and learned from Zen philosophy, as well as Christian mystics.

Merton corresponded with many influential contemporary artists and thinkers and the book includes many sections of his letters with people like Boris Pasternack, Erich Fromm, Daniel Berrigan, Henry Miller and many others. I truly enjoyed these exchanges and, in fact, have been motivated to re-read Pasternack's Dr. Zhivago again -- this time with Merton's insights in mind.

As the book progresses, so does Merton's thinking and reflection, but in a cyclical way. Towards the end of his life (which was abruptly ended by his accidental death in Bangkkok in 1968), the excerpts from his

writings from this time reflect a change of themes -- no longer at odds with the world, he begins to expose its paradoxes and contradictions. In the end, Merton always fell back to a mystical approach to God and living -- to emptiness and a return to the place from which one started for the very first time.

A good place to end this review, I think, is to offer yet another quote from Merton -- this time Merton's advice to a young aspiring writer:

"1. Never write down to anyone.
2. Never write simply what you think they want.
3. Write rather what is deepest in your own heart and what you know--as a writer has an instinct by which to know this--is also deep in theirs. In other words, write to elucidate problems that are common and urgent."

And this is indeed what Merton was able to do for us.

Alonzo says

I enjoyed this book, but didn't get a lot out of it as far as the "vocation of writing" is concerned. It is more memoir-ish, dealing with Merton's own vocation. And that leads to another concept: I think it has to do with his vocation to be a Catholic monk *and* a writer. Vocation in the narrower/earlier sense: i.e. a calling, rather than the more broader/more current sense of a career/job. And I really expected more about writing itself--as a skill/practice. There is some of that, but as you probably realize (and I missed) is that it deals more with *being* a Catholic monk, contemplative, and a writer in the world, in the context of readers and fellow-writers, etc.

That being said, there are a few ideas and concepts that are important across the board for writers from any lifestyle. So, that begs the question: is it worth reading to get those few nuggets that one may find in other books on writing? I guess that depends on the potential reader's interest.

If you're interested in Christian writing/writing as a Christian: yes
If you're interested in Thomas Merton's writing in general: yes
If you're interested in being a monk and a writer: definitely
If you are simply interested in becoming a writer: there's probably a better book out there, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't read this one....

The things I like most about this book is that it is a sort of anthology, with parts taken from several of Merton's books, so it's an introduction to his writing while trying to focus on the vocation of writing. There are a lot of good thoughts within the pieces included. Thoughts on life and on living, but that are (imho) not that pertinent to writing.

I recommend this book and hope you enjoy it as much as I did. But, if you're looking for a book on how to be a writer don't expect too much.

Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing

Ann says

I give it four stars only because of the fragmentary nature of the book. Most of the fragments were wonderful, and will lead me to more Merton I haven't yet read.

Richard Houchin says

Merton reads like a man who loves life struggling to rationalize his own suicide. The anti-human philosophy of Christian theology runs through Merton's thoughts like streams of offal through a neighborhood creek.

This is clearest when reading about the Catholic censors and their effect on Merton's writings, as well as when reading the sad progression of letters from Merton to his abbot. It's like watching a suicide -- what a waste.

Merton's views on advertising are amusing, however! It's a shame the censors wouldn't let him expand on his thoughts...

Brian says

Writers should be contemplatives, and vice versa. Merton says that much better so you should read this for that reason.

Hannah Cobb says

This is a compilation of Thomas Merton's writings on writing. Merton (Trappist monk, philosopher, poet, and author) delves into both the spiritual nature of his calling to write and the many outside sources of his inspiration, especially his contemporaries, authors who used their writing as a platform to protest injustice. While Merton was unquestionably a brilliant man who cared deeply about engaging the world outside his own religious sphere, I'm not sure how much a reader coming from a non-religious background would get out of this particular title (many of his other books are perhaps more accessible). I think anyone could relate to his struggle to balance the vocation of an artist with the many other demands of life, though, and the editor also includes a series of fascinating correspondence between Merton and other international authors of his time.

Ellen says

It was hard not to underline every sentence. A lot of great stuff in here. But, I guess I had expected a complete book written by Merton specifically about writing and writing as vocation. This is simply an edited volume, a compilation of different things Merton wrote throughout his life about writing, in letters, journals, and books. So, it's not an extended, cohesive philosophy on writing presented by Merton himself, which was really what I was hoping for.

Grace says

A friend of mine loves Merton and goaded me into reading this book. Me-- I don't get Merton so much; he doesn't seem to speak to where I am right now. I forced myself to read it. (Additionally, this book is made up of choppy little excerpts, so has no flow).

Helena says

There are gems in this book, and plenty of them, but at the same time, it's not a book that captures me so I read page by page in rapture. But will pick up some of Mertons books, that's for sure!

Greg Johnson says

Merton's writings on writings. Invaluable to writers, particularly writers concerned about conscience and who write from a Christian perspective. Life altering.
