

Introduction to Spiritual Autobiography: "Out of Silence - A Voice"

Overview: The spiritual life is a profoundly personal matter. Spiritual autobiographies, then, reveal our inner self - our struggles as we ache into holiness. Reading such works is like being invited into a dialogue with the soul itself. We are thus drawn to them because they tell us both about the individual who is writing it and the individual who is reading it. To approach spiritual autobiographies, we will begin by analyzing elements of Thomas Merton's works.

L Spiritual Autobiographies: Apertures to the Soul

Autobiography, memoirs, private and public journals, diaries—these are often wonderful apertures to the soul. As writing, they allow us access to a way of theologizing that is different from, and sometimes opposed to, the tract, the thesis, the polemic. It is the record of one person's spiritual yearnings, wanderings, misdirections, and encounters with the Transcendent.

Every autobiography brings the reader into a new intimacy with the writer, opens up new perspectives, and creates a different horizon for discovery.

II. Reasons for Writing a Spiritual Autobiography

- The reasons why a religious thinker would elect the autobiography over other genres include:
- Providing an honest account of experience without requiring a defense
- Exploring the dramatic centrality of a conversion moment, spiritual illumination, or epiphany

Thomas Merton is an ideal example of the master spiritual autobiographer. The author of numerous works on diverse subjects, a prolific correspondent with both the mighty and the humble, a social critic of telling perception, and a powerful visionary poet in the tradition of William Blake, Merton spoke to the world from the confines of a cloister secure in the hills of Kentucky.

Though he was drawn by temperament and conviction to a climate of thought and faith in twelfth century France, it is a measure of Merton's breadth of interest and spiritual maturity that he felt equally at home with the Rhineland mystics, the early Taoists, twentieth-century existentialists, and the world of Zen. In the midst of the regulated life of a Trappist monk, with its many offices of praise both sung and spoken, its central celebration of the Eucharist, its hours of manual labor and private prayer, its appointed times of study and spiritual direction, Merton discovered a world that knows no laws or limitations, a world of true spiritual

freedom: the world of love.

Review Questions

1. Why is the autobiography so free, creative, and dangerous a genre?
2. What qualities draw the reader to autobiography?
3. What key features attract you to Merton's honest and searing self-disclosures?