

Imaginary Conversations

Review of
Unfinished Business: Dialogues with Thomas Merton
 By Forrest Johnson
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 88 pages / \$8.40 paper

Reviewed by **David Goleboski**

As an author, Thomas Merton is perhaps known best for his journals, essays and monographs, discourses addressed either to himself or to the world at large. But virtually anyone who has spent time with Merton's work knows also of the wealth to be found in his correspondence with friends, public intellectuals, admirers and others. One can see Merton come alive in these exchanges. Thus, it is in a sense fitting to construct a work about Merton in the format of dialogue itself. Such is the approach taken by Forrest Johnson in his *Unfinished Business: Dialogues with Thomas Merton*.

Unfinished Business presents twenty fictional dialogues, most of which feature Merton in conversation with one other person, though a few involve people talking about, rather than to, Merton. In a very brief Introduction (a single page), Johnson explains that he is motivated by the experience of reading Merton's published journals, which he found "candid and forthright" (ix). The first half of the book consists of dialogues between Merton and people that he knew in life. In the second half, Johnson shifts to a set of dialogues featuring individuals that Johnson himself knew. He suggests that these are people whose lives and work "would have been of interest to Merton" (ix). The book appears to be loosely formatted as a theatrical production. Each dialogue is headlined by an identification of the "Setting" and "Characters," and stage directions are sprinkled throughout. Each of the first eleven scenes closes with "[*Curtain*]."

The dialogues of Part I occur in roughly chronological order, covering the time from Merton's days at Columbia until he is preparing to leave for his trip to Asia in 1968. A prologue and epilogue to this section depict Abbot Flavian Burns (identified only as "The Abbot") receiving and processing the news of Merton's death, delivered to him by "The Guestmaster." The dialogues focus heavily on Merton's own wrestling with the contradictory elements of his personality. We hear him ramble about his personal depravity to Robert Lax; he debates joining the Trappists with Mark Van Doren and Catherine de Hueck Doherty; he explains his feelings about his upcoming trip to Asia with an unnamed brother monk. In a conversation with M. ("his friend" [21]), Merton reflects: "I'm sure God would share me with you and anyone else, but God knows what a desiccated thing I am. I have a pen, I'm vain enough to think He wants that, but knows that in the world I'd lose it somewhere. Someone would find it but would never find me" (23). Because the first part of the book occupies a total of thirty pages, these internal tensions are not explored to great depths. However,

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Forrest Johnson's appreciation for the candor of Merton's journals shows through in the unresolved character he depicts.

The second half of *Unfinished Business* is more mysterious. Johnson supplies an eclectic bunch of characters that defies any obvious explanation. From Martin Luther King to Henri Nouwen to Bp. James Pike to Norman Thomas to Lenny Bruce (not to mention a few unnamed personalities: "A Parson," "A Stranger," among others), we are invited to imagine the exchanges that might have occurred if Merton had been given a few moments to speak with these luminaries. The exchanges are amusing, but often simplistic. Consider these final lines from Merton's dialogue with Lenny Bruce:

Bruce: Funny. I wanted to see you because I think we're trying to do the same thing. You're blowing the horn from the inside; I'm making noises outside. But maybe someday the walls will tumble.

Merton: Keep it up Lenny. I'm sure they will. (49)

The weaknesses of *Unfinished Business* are many. It is peppered with typographic and stylistic as well as substantive errors. Perhaps the most egregious is Johnson's misdating of Merton's death as December 8, 1968. (Merton died on December 10.) As a work of fiction, the book is unimpressive. The dialogue is flat and uninteresting. The theatrical format is undeveloped; it would be a strange and boring play. While the first half of the book coheres as a presentation of Merton's life, the second half feels disjointed and inconsequential. The book suffers from a lack of any commentary, leaving it up to the reader to guess at the significance the author imagined for each "scene."

Forrest Johnson's previous writings – and indeed his life's pursuits – have been adventurous with respect to the boundaries of genre. He has drawn on his experiences as a pastor to present fictionalized profiles of members of the Christian flock under titles such as *A Parson's Tales*, *St. Francis's Shadow and Other Stories*, and *Ordinary People and Other Stories*. A biography accompanying one of these volumes indicates that Johnson "has served as a pastor of churches in the Middle West, New England and Texas." Additionally, "he has been an actor, television and radio commentator, and a practicing politician." Johnson makes no claim to be an expert on Merton, and the weaknesses of *Unfinished Business* are not fatal to his effort. They do, however, remind one of the perils of self-publishing. The aid of an editor could do much to liberate this work of its typos, check its facts for accuracy, and strengthen the drabest pieces of dialogue. That said, the sincerity of Johnson's admiration for Merton shines through. This sort of genuine offering is refreshing and should not be too hastily dismissed.

The central question for me remains this: why create a set of fictional dialogues for Merton when we have access to such a rich record of *actual* correspondence between Merton and his contemporaries? Johnson does not claim to draw from the letters, but rather from the journals – the most monological of Merton's writings. He adopts the puzzling project of inventing dialogue for a person who had no trouble creating conversation on his own. Perhaps the explanation lies in a sense that Merton needs to be placed in conversation with figures from beyond his life or time. This is surely true. But Merton's voice is relevant in our day without the aid of imagined dialogues that reveal little new about him or his conversation partners. *Unfinished Business* may provoke a few smiles for Merton admirers, but an infinitely richer and more fascinating perspective can be found in his journals and letters themselves. At least that's what I imagine Merton might say.