

REVIEWS

ELECTED SILENCE: The Autobiography of Thomas Merton. (Hollis & Carter; 15s.)

The Catholic reader will take up this volume, the autobiography of a young American Cistercian, with great interest and perhaps a little surprise, for the writing of autobiographies is not the customary labour of Cistercian monks. To justify such a breach of the spirit of monastic silence there is naturally demanded something more than common interest or literary achievement. There must be something of supernatural value, serving an apostolic purpose and leading souls back to God. It is the claim of this review that the book is justified on these grounds.

General and wide interest there certainly is, and the writer is gifted with an easy, natural style that rarely fails, and at times achieves literary excellence. There are granted revealing glimpses of life in America, France and England. The provincial French Lycée is compared with the English preparatory and public school. Cambridge is placed side by side with American university life. Communism is exposed among the students on the campus of Columbia. The reader witnesses again the pre-war years and early years of the war from the far side of the Atlantic. Passages occur of great beauty and human appeal, for example the tribute to a holy French family in the Auvergne, the candid confession of the callous way he treated his young brother, John Paul, supplemented at the end of the book by the passage telling of John Paul's visit to Gethsemani, his reception into the Church, and finally his gallant death in the North Sea. Among the finest pages in the book are those describing his unconscious pilgrimage in Rome. Among the saddest are those that tell of his father's illness and death, with his own reaction to the enigma of human pain in days when he had no faith.

But we approach nearer to the purpose of the book when we begin to trace the many and most varied influences that were gradually preparing the soul of this young 'pagan' (so he styles himself) for the faith and for a high religious vocation. In this is revealed the unifying principle of the book, which is not merely a collection of interesting reminiscences, but a drama unfolding the working of divine Providence, that makes all things turn to the good of a soul that is being led, without detriment to its liberty, from sin to sanctity, from death to life.

Among these influences may be noted the sincere but inadequate religion of his father, his love for France that introduced him to the lingering spirit of mediaeval Catholicism, his contact with the French family mentioned above, his unintended pilgrimage in Rome, where the ancient mosaics and paintings secretly spoke to him of Christ. Among writers, St Thomas, Aldous Huxley, Gilson, Blake,

Hopkins and James Joyce all helped in different degrees and ways to prepare his mind and soul for faith. Strangest perhaps of all, a gentle Hindu monk, whom peculiar circumstances had stranded in America, introduced him to the Imitation of Christ and the Confessions of St Augustine. Rare picture—this quiet, cheerful Indian monk, befriended by noisy young American students, sharing their rooms, even present at their parties. But among all these influences that led him gradually to the Church and her sanctity he admits that human relationship held a high rank, as so often it must and should in man's approach to God.

In addition to affording this valuable study in the psychology of conversion, the occasional short passages on the spiritual life are invaluable for their clear, unhackneyed expression of truths of the supernatural order. Quotations would be out of place here, but this reader is personally convinced that these portions of the book make it rank among the best contemporary writings on Catholic spirituality. Nevertheless, the passage of years alone will determine the permanent spiritual value of the book.

Points that call for criticism have already received attention in English reviews. There is a tendency to judge and condemn places and institutions on subjective grounds, because of his own reactions to them, his own inability to draw from them the good they certainly contain, however mixed with evil. So Cambridge, England and Europe are in turn at least partially condemned. The reader must remember throughout the book that he is sharing in the personal impressions of a sensitive nature, not yet fully matured in its judgments.

Some may feel justified in criticising the book as being too self-centred, stained by the exaggerated profession of personal guilt. But it must be remembered that this autobiography is essentially the history of a soul, not the reminiscences of peoples, places and external events. Of its nature it must centre upon the self, and, through that revelation of self, work back to the knowledge of God. That gradual transference of attention to God will necessarily bring into strong relief the sins of the past, and that in a degree not always appreciated by the less spiritual reader. Otherwise, surely, we would have to judge with the same judgment that far greater story of a soul, of which at times this book reminds us, the Confessions of St Augustine.

The book concludes with an attractive yet balanced picture of the life led today in all Cistercian houses, essentially the same in all countries and ages. It will come as a surprise to many to learn that this ancient way of life, going back through the centuries to St Bernard and St Benedict, enjoys supernatural health and youth nowhere so richly in these days as in the most modern of countries, the United States of America.

We may conclude by expressing our conviction that this autobiography has a work to do, among non-Catholics, by dispelling

prejudice and introducing them, in a homely and human way, to the wonder of the Catholic Church and to the high ideal of holiness that is hers; among converts, by encouraging them on their hard journey and saving them from many misunderstandings; among Catholics, by deepening their love of the Faith and by helping many of them to determine their vocation to the contemplative life, so necessary for society in these times.

BRUNO WALKER, O.C.R.

VISION OF PERU. By Violet Clifton. (Duckworth; 21s.)

This fascinating story of the early history of Peru was, I believe, originally designed to be a biography of a mulatto slave boy who became a Dominican lay brother and is likely to become in the near future Saint Martin of Porres. But the biography grew to a far greater stature nourished by Mrs Clifton's own profound experience of the country as well as her researches into its ancient history. The result is the model of what every life of a saint should be if it were only possible. For she shows Martin as part of the life of a people and the existence of a place. Hagiography so easily isolates the object of its study so that the saint becomes a statue on a pedestal instead of a man who grew up among a people with a peculiar heritage and an immediate history. With other saints this concrete treatment is practically impossible because, at least in Europe, the history is so extravagantly varied and there are so many other saints, contemporaneous or approximately so, that it is beyond human contrivance to make them really living and to preserve them from their pedestal of isolation. But in South America Martin was born in the age of tradition when the Incas were disappearing and the Spaniards taking over everything. Moreover his father was a Spaniard, his mother an African slave; and so Mrs Clifton could see the whole history of that period and place somehow turning round in Martin. 'In this storm-coloured, this cloud-coloured one, three Continents took share because, in America, the lust of Europe quickened the womb of Africa, and so was born the son of an enslaved, and of a conquering race.' And the only other saint of that time and place was Rose of Lima, also a Dominican, who appears equally concrete and in her true setting. This book cannot therefore be called a life of Martin or Rose, but is indeed a Vision focussed on those two figures yet embracing an infinite variety in the reality that was and is Peru.

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

DIE GESCHICHTE UND GEBETSSCHULE DES ROSENKRANZES.

DER ROSENKRANZ UND DAS MENSCHENLEBEN.

Both by Franz Michel William. (Herder; Vienna.)

'The Rosary', says the author of these two attractive books, may be compared with a plant that migrates and grows. On the British Isles this spiritual rose bush springs up in luxurious green