THOMAS MERTON:

MYSTIC OR MYSTIQUE

An Alternative View of a Would-Be

Mystic, Reformer, Zen Master

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Religious Studies

University of the West

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Mark Sax Schmittle

Spring 2018

APPROVAL PAGE FOR GRADUATE

Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies.

Mark Schmittle
Candidate

December 12, 2017
Date

Thomas Merton: Mystic or Mystique
An Alternative View of a Would-Be
Mystic, Reformer, and Zen Master

APPROVED:

Jane Iwamura, Chair	December 12, 2017
Victor Gabriel, Committee Member	December 12, 2017
Jitsujo Gauthier, Committee Member	December 12, 2017

I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any other institution, and that it is entirely my own work.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Thomas Merton's life and writings in relation to monastic renewal, interreligious dialogue and Catholic/Zen dialogue. Thomas Merton was a Catholic monk and writer who was born in 1915 and died in 1968. His writings were highly influential, particularly in the development of Catholic monastic renewal and dialogue between Eastern and Western religions.

Utilizing Merton's own writings, numerous biographies, and essays about Merton, I examine the basis for his enormous influence. In doing so, I draw out the relation between what is popularly believed about Merton and what the historical data reveals. Using the *Councils and Maxims* of St. John of the Cross as a framework I will compare Merton's life to his own stated spiritual goals. My thesis is that Merton's failure to focus upon his central goal as a monk was a determining factor in his writings on monastic reform, Zen, and interreligious dialogue, which should be viewed in this light.

To many Christians Merton's views regarding monasticism, Zen, and other Eastern religions are widely accepted as a reliable representation of these complex traditions. To insure effective communication between faith traditions the endeavor to understand another religion must rely upon accurate representation of the religion whether in the form of doctrinal or lived expressions. A misrepresentation of Merton's experience of Zen as well as his personal monastic experience, from which much of his authority arises, could lead not to a more profitable monastic renewal or greater mutual comprehension between the Catholic and Zen faith traditions, but to confusion regarding foundational aspects of the two religions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

This land was long wild with heresy, and with the fake mysticism that tore men away from the Church and from the Sacraments, and sent them into hiding to fight their way to some strange, suicidal nirvana.[1]

INTRODUCTION

My thesis in this study is that Thomas Merton abandoned his original goal of living a contemplative life due to tension created by the process of self-annihilation such a life requires. This abandonment of his goal motivated much of his later writings on monastic renewal, social justice, and Zen, and it would be more profitable, therefore, to consider them in this light rather than as the writings of a mystic or fully integrated human being as he is widely considered to have been.

I began this study asking the question, "Why did Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, find such a deep attraction to and interest in Zen?" My familiarity with Merton was based on having read his more popular works many years ago while in college. I was attracted to his early writings that bore such a compelling adulation of the contemplative life to which I felt drawn myself. I had no familiarity with his journals or personal correspondence, nor to his later essays on monastic renewal and other religions. My idea of Thomas Merton was that common within the general public: that he was a very devout and spiritual writer who did much to deepen the relationship between Eastern religions and the Catholic Church. Reading Merton's journals changed my view considerably. I soon found myself asking why Merton was considered an authority, much less a master of the spiritual life.

[1] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1948), 43.

It is not that I found Thomas Merton ignorant. On the contrary, I doubt anyone would deny the vast breadth of his knowledge about religion and the spiritual life. What struck me with the greatest urgency was the great dichotomy between Merton's personal life and what he portrayed in his writings, between how Merton is "marketed" in the spiritual presses and what his personal life was truly like. It was not simply that Merton had engaged in some edgy behavior; in many ways he appeared to be a crass and unjust individual consumed with self-interest at the expense of those with whom he lived. I found his life as expressed in his own words in his own journals to be almost the antithesis of the "integrated," "selfless" individual as he is so often portrayed. In consideration of this, my main question evolved into "to what extent and in what manner did the historical experience of Merton's own struggles effect his interest and writing regarding social justice, monastic renewal, and Zen."

In his introduction to Merton's lectures to his novices published under the title *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, Patrick O'Connell cautions against utilizing Merton's journals as a sole reference to his mind and heart. O'Connell notes that other sources, particularly his novitiate lectures can serve an important role in forming an accurate understanding of Merton:

> They are a salutary check against "over-privileging" the journals, which could and certainly did at times serve to express Merton's immediate feelings and reactions rather than his considered impressions and judgements, and so are not to be set up as an absolute standard for determining the 'authentic' Merton. The dialectical relationship between Merton's private and more public statements, including those made to his novice classes, allows for and makes possible a more complex and thus a richer picture of his monastic identity and so of his personal identity.[2]

[2] Thomas Merton, *Introduction into the Monastic Tradition*, Vol. 1, *Cassian and the Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005), xlvi.

While it is true that in his journal writings Merton did often change his mind upon further consideration, and did make unconsidered, perhaps impulsive remarks, it is also true that the journals relate documentation of attitudes and opinions he held consistently over long periods of time. These attitudes and opinions included "unconsidered remarks" that were repeated consistently over time. That fact that Merton often lamented having expressed such remarks does not change the fact that he did express them and expressed them repeatedly.

An example of this are the remarks he made regarding his abbot Dom James Fox. Merton would make entries that were quite critical, harsh, and by most estimates of those who knew both Merton and Fox, unjust. Merton would often retract his earlier statements noting how ill-considered they were, yet months, weeks, or even days later, he would virtually repeat his earlier remarks. Such cycles in his thoughts and attitudes would occur over periods of years and even decades. So, while it is true that Merton's comments should be judged within the context not only of his journals, but of other sources as well, his journals offer a view of the consistency of his thoughts and attitudes – even his ill-considered thoughts and attitudes. From this perspective, remarks made by Merton in more public forums, such as his novice conferences, that may be taken as indicative of his beliefs, should be judged against his journal writings that offer a more private and consistent context.

O'Connell also concludes that the dialectic between Merton's private and public statements and writings will produce a more accurate understanding of his "personal identity." This is a point I try to address in this study; precisely that Merton's published, and unpublished writings and lectures do *not* produce an accurate understanding of his

personal identity, but rather a quite misguided portrayal of who Merton was. If his writings are read with the view that he was a saint, a mystic, a Zen master, a fully integrated human being, the reader will undoubtedly interpret his writings from a very different horizon than if they were read with a more accurate understanding of how Merton actually lived his life. If one seeks to know a person's mind and heart it would be more profitable to examine how the person lives rather than what the person says or writes. In this regard, Merton's journals recounting how he lived do favor a more accurate view of his monastic and personal identity. As Aristotle points out in his poetics, "Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions - what we do - that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the characters for the sake of the actions."[3] If we want to know Thomas Merton and understand his writings we must look first to his actions.

In this study, I utilize the history of Merton's personal development and thought as presented in his own journals and correspondence as a foil against which to examine what he wrote and the concerns he expressed in his essays and other published writings. What I found is an image of Thomas Merton, that to my knowledge, has never been expressed in a critical study and which I believe valuable in assessing his contribution to religion and interfaith understanding.

[3] Aristotle, *De Poetica*, In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1461. Aristotle writes, "And again, one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the utmost finish as regards Diction and Thought, and yet fail to produce the true tragic effect; but one will have much better success with a tragedy which, however inferior in these respects, has a Plot, a combination of incidents, in it." It is Merton's actions that will convey a richer understanding of his writings than his writings themselves.

The beginning of this study seeks to establish Merton's enormous influence and thereby account for its relevance and importance. In the second chapter I will review Merton's early years, the time before his entry into monastic enclosure, to see how these themes contributed to and brought to the surface Merton's awareness of his own need for salvation and how they directed his path to Christian monasticism and Gethsemani. In Chapters Three and Four, I will review these same themes through his years in the monastery, dividing them into two periods; the first period covering his early monastic experience from the time he entered Gethsemani until his solemn profession in 1948 and the second covering the remaining years until his death in 1968. These chapters will continue to explore the themes of restlessness and rebelliousness in relation to his life as a professed monk and writer and how writing itself became the primary evasive tactic employed by Merton to escape the commitment needed to progress on his spiritual journey. Having presented what I hope is a more balanced view of Merton's actual life, in Chapter Five I will argue that most Merton biographers present him in a very skewed light that, based on my study of his life, misinterprets Merton personally, and subsequently, results in a defective understanding of his writings. Chapter Six examines in depth how the conflicts in Merton's life were manifested in his propensity to evade the demands of contemplation for self-abnegation. This propensity to evasion is presented in Chapter Seven as a more likely motivation for Merton's interest in Zen, monastic renewal and social justice, showing that his many interests were motivated not so much by an altruistic mindset or a relentless quest for the truth, but as justifications for avoiding the "leap of faith" his spiritual journey demanded.

On numerous occasions in his journals Merton expressed his desire to adhere to and follow the *Councils and Maxims* of St. John of the Cross as the surest path to transforming union in Christ. I will use these maxims as a framework for examining Merton's life in relation to his goal of achieving contemplative union with God and how the tension inherent in this endeavor provoked a radical change in his thought and writings regarding contemplation from what he held into the late 1940's to what developed at the end of the 1950's and into the 1960's. I include them as a reference point for the reader to evaluate Merton's activities in relation to them. These are the goals toward which Merton was aiming in the first decade of his monastic life. His journals indicate that by the late 1940's Merton's life was drawing ever closer to epitomizing the antithesis of these counsels. He could not hold to this program of contemplative development due to what he termed an obsession with writing and acclaim. In the late 1950's he begins to form a new understanding of contemplation that did not require the annihilation of self advocated by these maxims. I argue that Merton's interest in social justice, monastic renewal and Eastern religions was not the result of a more balanced individual approximating spiritual maturity, but the expression of one seeking to evade his own spiritual path. The full text of the *Precautions and Counsels* are found in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER ONE

Merton's Influence

The Significance of Merton's Work

Thomas Merton wrote on numerous subjects including literary criticism, book reviews, culture, and a variety of political issues including the peace movement, civil rights, relations with third world countries, and ecology. He is known most famously, however, for his writings on spirituality and interreligious dialogue. These writings are often expressed in autobiographical form since this was Merton's preferred genre, yet he also wrote many books and articles on these subjects, as well as an enormous number of letters of correspondence with many individuals throughout the world. This chapter seeks to establish Merton's influence and authority within the framework of spirituality and interreligious dialogue, particularly as it bears upon Catholic spirituality and the "Catholic" understanding of Zen.

I am asking *why Merton's understanding of contemplation changed so radically that he could develop a great interest in such things as Zen and social activism*. Part of the significance of this question rests upon Merton's influence upon the understanding of Zen, social justice, and monastic reform by those within the Catholic Church. If Merton exerted no or little influence in the field of inter-religious affairs, for instance, the question of the reason for his involvement in Zen would be moot. If, on the other hand, Merton's writings exerted significant or even unparalleled influence among Catholics

regarding Buddhism, and Zen in particular,[4] the motivation for his thought immediately becomes important. The motivation for Merton's involvement in Zen is only as important as his influence in this field. Identifying the extent and nature of Merton's *influence* upon Roman Catholics regarding these issues, will help establish the significance of his motivation.

Although, as will be shown, Merton's writings on Zen have exerted the most significant influence of Eastern thought upon Catholic spirituality, he was not the first Catholic priest or scholar to write on Zen. The works of other Christian authors such as the Episcopal priest Alan Watts, whose book *The Way of Zen* was published in 1957, and Dom Aelred Graham, whose *Zen Catholicism* appeared in 1963, also offered a positive evaluation of Zen that preceded Merton's publications on this topic. Merton, however, had already gained enormous popular influence, not only among Catholics, but among a broad spectrum of individuals due to his various autobiographical writings and books on spirituality and social justice during the 1940's, 50's, and early 60's. It may be for this reason that Merton's essay *The Zen Revival* published in 1967 and his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* published in 1968, sparked the greatest interest in Zen among Catholics.[5]

Merton's writings have evoked both a positive and negative reaction in relation to interreligious dialogue. Some view him as a prophet, mystic, and even a saint, as well as

---

[4] Merton preferred to treat Zen as a non-Buddhist, perhaps even non-religious approach to life, however, as Zen is widely viewed as a form of Buddhism his treatment of Zen necessarily influences the understanding of Buddhism in general. This distinction in Merton's thought is important and will be addressed in a later chapter.

[5] Merton's book *Mystics and Zen Masters* was published in 1961, however, his treatment of Zen in this work was very cursory and did not present Zen in relation to Catholicism.

a forerunner in the effort to bring about a universal understanding of the human spiritual quest. Others, however, warn against his writings as syncretistic, fundamentally flawed, and revelatory of a man whose life had lost direction and who had, perhaps, abandoned the spiritual quest in all respects other than his writings. Whether one understands Merton's writings as positive or negative, they are by all accounts important and influential as will now be shown.

Positive Evaluations of Merton's Work

Notre Dame University professor and theologian Lawrence S. Cunningham claimed that Merton "almost singlehandedly made the American Catholic public aware of its profound contemplative tradition" and was "the foremost American spiritual writer of his generation."[6] For Lawrence and others, the controversial nature of his writings and his consistent questioning of the conventional are what made Merton so popular and relevant in the eyes of many.

Anne Carr of the University of Chicago shares this sentiment. In her essay *Merton's East-West Reflections* she writes:

> Yet love for this figure who has been named "the symbol of a century" and who despite his European origins and cosmopolitan education is so American, continues to draw students and scholars alike to reflect on his life and thought. He is a unique symbol for so many because he embodied in his life and recorded in his journals, autobiographies, and essays, so much of our own search . . . They are drawn by *all* his writings, by his retrieval of the monastic and mystical

[6] Lawrence S. Cunningham, "Thomas Merton: The Pursuit of Marginality," *The Christian Century*, December 6, 1978, 1181.

> traditions of Christian spirituality and concomitantly by the breadth of Merton's openness to other religious traditions.[7]

For Carr, Merton represents a middle path or "relative absolute" as Langdon Gilkey[8] phrased it, between "crossing the Rubicon," that is, relativizing all religions as possessing equal legitimacy and those who insist that crossing the Rubicon verges on undermining the validity of the religious question itself by refusing to admit the possibility that any religion possesses absolute truth. This "relative absolute" represents "an openness to the other, to the new, a willingness to learn from that which is different and strange, but from the concomitant standpoint that allows one to contribute from the distinct perspective of one's own religious point of view."[9] Importantly, Carr notes that what allowed Merton to engage other religions in such a manner was his "continuing conviction that the highest metaphysical and religious truth, including the truth of Christianity, is primarily a matter of experience and only secondarily a question of doctrine."[10] The emphasis upon experience, however, can be problematic. Experience is necessarily subjective and, therefore, prone to a variety of interpretations. Religions, on the other hand – even those as esoteric as Zen, tend to absolutize their doctrine precisely to safeguard against misinterpretation, to act as a standard in relation to which an experience may be judged. Yet there is no question that Merton's method enabled him to progress in relations with other religions, albeit on the basis of experience.

---

[7] Anne Carr, "Merton's East-West Reflections," *Horizon* 21, no. 2, (1994) 239.

[8] Ibid., 241.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 244.

In his forward to William Shannon's biography *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, A. M. Allchin, director of the *St. Theosevia Centre for Christian Spirituality Oxford, England*, wrote:

> Of all the aspects of Merton's work, his gift of crossing the frontiers between great world religions is perhaps the most significant for the future of humankind. His journey to Asia is the last year of his life brought him into contact with leading figures in the world of Buddhism, not least the Dalai Lama. The photograph of them together taken after their long conversations on the relations between the two religions is something of an icon of hope for the future of humanity.[11]

Shannon himself, after quoting Isaiah 9:2[12] in reference to Merton's impact, remarked regarding the choice of *Silent Lamp* for the title of his book saying, "But to understand the man and the amazing impact of his writings, there is need to emphasize the fact that for an enormous and ever-growing number of people, he has been their true . . . spiritual mentor . . . and he is indeed a "lamp" for them."[13]

For some, the appealing feature of Merton's writings was his conviction that adherence to and the understanding of one's own tradition can be fostered through knowledge of other faiths and spiritual traditions. Sidney Griffith writes regarding Merton's contributions to interreligious dialogue, "They reveal the depth of Merton's

---

[11] William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Story of Thomas Merton* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), xiii.

[12] *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who lived in a land as dark as death a light has dawned*. In Christian biblical exegesis this verse from the Old Testament Prophets is interpreted in reference to Jesus, and Shannon implies Merton's influence upon the 20th century, while not messianic, was a unique blessing.

[13] Shannon, 5.

inter-religious empathy and his capacity to experience the "other" from within." Griffith says his writings not only helped Christians understand the "other," in the persons of such individuals as Buddhists, Taoists, and Muslims, but even helped them "to see how knowledge of the 'other' might aid a deeper development of their own Christian faith." For Griffith, Merton serves as a model for those engaging in inter-religious dialogue in so far as he was able to empathize deeply with other faith traditions without "crossing the boundaries of his own faith commitment." This ability to balance empathy with commitment allows one to overcome the fear of encountering the "other."[14] Griffith maintains that while Merton never intended to develop an inter-religious theology his work remains important because he focused upon personal encounters with individuals of other traditions that bore fruit in the articulation of a common religious experience that is still valid.[15]

Merton's close friend Jim Forest attempted to quell assertions that Merton had abandoned his Catholic faith by saying:

> Because Merton was drawn to develop relationships with non-Christians – Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists – casual readers occasionally form the impression that Merton's bond with Christianity was wearing thin during the latter years of his life and that he was window-shopping for something else. It is not unusual to meet people who think that, had he only lived longer, he would have become a Buddhist. But as you get to know Merton's life and writing more intimately, you come to understand that his door to communion with others was Christ Himself. Apart from times of illness, he celebrated Mass nearly every day of his life from the time of his ordination in 1949 until he died in Thailand 19 years later. Even while visiting the Dalai Lama in the Himalayas, he found time

[14] Sidney H. Griffith, "'Sharing the Experience of the Divine Light': Thomas Merton's Path to Inter-religious Understanding; Encounters and Dialogues with Muslims," *Crosscurrents*, March, 2009, 610.

[15] Ibid., 611.

> to recite the usual Trappist monastic offices . . . Few people lived so Christ-centered a life.[16]

Rescinding from the question of whether fulfilling a monk's official duties is sufficient for judging a "Christ-centered life," for Forest, as for many, it was precisely Merton's spirituality centered in Christ that allowed him to recognize the sacredness of all things "created in Christ's image"; it was this appeal to the universal presence of Christ that was the basis of Merton's fundamental trust in the goodness of other faith traditions.

Perhaps the most influential voice within Catholic monasticism in the 20th century was the Benedictine Dom Jean Leclercq. Leclercq was a personal friend of Merton and encouraged him in his Eastern studies and involvement in inter-religious dialogue. It was Leclercq, in fact, who had invited Merton to attend the Asian conference during which Merton died. He wrote concerning Merton:

> A prophet is a person of neither vague ideas nor ready-made solutions. He or she is a person who, by reason of the vigor of his or her concepts and the intensity of his or her contemplation, compels other persons to act, giving them worthy reasons for doing so. Because he was a person of vision — not of "visions" — a powerful catalyst, Merton was a prophet." [17]

Comparing Merton to St. Bernard and other Cistercian fathers of the 12th century Leclercq emphasizes Merton's ability to motivate people to action through "the vigor of

---

[16] Christopher Blosser, "Towards a Critical Appreciation of Thomas Merton," Against the Grain, last modified January 2, 2005, http://www.ratzingerfanclub.com/blog/2005/01/towards-critical-appreciation-of.html. This quote was taken from a lecture delivered by Forest at Boston College on November 13, 1995.

[17] Shannon, 13.

his thought" and "intensity of his contemplation." This is a vision of Merton shared by many who have come to know him through his writings meant for publication. Shannon writes, "In the estimation of an ever-growing number of people, from all walks of life and different religious, racial, and academic backgrounds, *he is easily the most important and influential writer on the life of the spirit in the twentieth century*."[18] As we will see, there are some who challenge this view of Merton on all accounts, in terms of his intellectual vigor as well as his commitment to prayer and contemplation. Whether their opinion is valid or not, the fact remains that Leclercq and many others considered Merton to have achieved great strides in the articulation of monastic thought as well as the promotion of the practice of contemplation, the contemplative life, and the understanding of other religious traditions.

Paul Bernadicou, S.J. points out three factors that produced Merton's impact upon American Catholics: Merton's personal growth into social awareness, his thought and writings were a reflection and the outcome of his lived experience, and his emphasis upon "being our authentic and integral selves."[19] He remarks:

> Merton continues to speak prophetically nearly fifteen years after his death, because his own personal growth and brilliantly articulated insights still call us to the cutting edge of American Catholic religious developments, just as they did during his over twenty years of prolific output as a Trappist who was a writer, poet, artist, theologian, literary critic, and ultimately a social critic.[20]

---

[18] Shannon, 13. Emphasis mine.

[19] Paul Bernadicou, S.J., "The Eastward Turn of Thomas Merton," *Science et Esprit* 34, no. 3 (1982): 356-358.

[20] Ibid.

Bernadicou's assessment regarding Merton's continued popularity remains valid.

In Glenn Crider's examination of Merton's evolving understanding of contemplation, he holds that Merton's openness to other cultures and ways of thought are what "allowed the mature Merton to elude a myriad of religious and spiritual pigeonholes and illusions. Consequently, Thomas Merton remains a great awakener for those who choose to attune themselves to his life and work."[21] Crider echoes the affirmation of Merton's "universality" as a means to bridging the chasms between East/West thought.

At this point I would like to note the impression of Merton upon several Buddhists prominent within the inter-religious dialogue. The first is the Dalai Lama who spoke of Merton in an op-ed piece in the New York Times saying:

> Granted, every religion has a sense of exclusivity as part of its core identity. Even so, I believe there is genuine potential for mutual understanding. While preserving faith toward one's own tradition, one can respect, admire and appreciate other traditions.
> An early eye-opener for me was my meeting with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in India shortly before his untimely death in 1968. Merton told me he could be perfectly faithful to Christianity, yet learn in depth from other religions like Buddhism. The same is true for me as an ardent Buddhist learning from the world's other great religions . . .
>
> I'm a firm believer in the power of personal contact to bridge differences, so I've long been drawn to dialogues with people of other religious outlooks. The focus on compassion that Merton and I observed in our two religions strikes me as a strong unifying thread among all the major faiths. And these days we need to highlight what unifies us.[22]

---

[21] Glenn Crider, "Thomas Merton's Contemplation: Rarefied Emblem of Being Human and Living in Mystery," *Crosscurrents* 58, no. 4 (2008): 592.

[22] As quoted by Fr. James Martin, SJ, "What the Dalai Lama Learned From Thomas Merton," *America: The National Catholic Review*, last modified May 25, 2010, http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/what-dalai-lama-learned-thomas-merton.

The Dalai Lama's reflection reinforces the contention that Merton remained a solid Catholic monk to the end of his life, however confusing his attempts to understand other religions may have been to others. Furthermore, it was Merton's outreach to the Dalai Lama that evoked the recognition of their mutual appreciation of compassion. It was not a discussion of doctrinal matters, but a consideration of the common praxis of compassion that contributed to not only an atmosphere of toleration, but of mutual esteem between the two monks. This "atmosphere" grew as years passed as a direct result of the meeting of Merton and the Dalai Lama as the Dalai Lama himself testified at a memorial service for Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemane in 1996:

> He not only was able to practice himself, but his perspective was very, very broad. Thus, it seems to me that in this memorial or recollection of him, we should seek to be following his example that he gave to us. In this way, even though the chapter of his life is over, what he was hoping to do and seeking to do can remain forever. Not only is his wonderful model being followed in this monastery, but it seems to me that if all of us followed this model, it would become very widespread and would be of very great benefit to the world.[23]

One can hardly deny the legacy of Merton's influence upon openness between Eastern and Western religious traditions.

Before Merton had the opportunity to meet with the Dalai Lama, however, his abbot had given him permission in 1964 to travel to New York City to meet with D.T. Suzuki. It was the first time Merton had traveled by himself away from his monastery

---

[23] Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 7.

since his entrance in 1941. Merton's relationship with Suzuki had been developing over a period of years, beginning in a series of letters exchanged between the two in 1956. Through these exchanges and mutual critiques both Merton and Suzuki developed in their prospective understandings of the other's ideas. While early estimations by Suzuki of Merton's understanding of Zen were mixed, and even at times negative, he gained more confidence in Merton after the publication of Merton's *The Zen Revival*. After reading this article Suzuki is reported to have commented, "There is more true understanding of Zen in this article than anything I have ever read by a Western writer."[24] As Merton's grasp of Zen developed, Suzuki eventually came to approve of Merton's understanding in a rather startling positive affirmation. Merton claimed Suzuki considered him to be the first Westerner he had encountered who possessed an appropriate grasp of Zen. In a letter to his friend Robert Lax, Merton describes his 1964 meeting with Suzuki as follows:

> I was to visit Suzuki, you heard me right. I was to visit with him very old, but secretary young and spry make the tea ceremony and Suzuki with the ear trumpet propose many koans from Chinese book and in the middle they gang up on me with winks and blinks and all kinds of friendly glances and assurances and they declare with one voice: 'Who is the western writer who understand best the Zen IT IS YOU' they declare. You in this connection means me. It is I in person that they have elected to this slot and number of position to be one in the west. First west Zen is now my food for thought.[25]

---

[24] Joseph Quinn Raab, "Openness and Fidelity: Thomas Merton's Dialogue With D.T. Suzuki, and Self-Transcendence," (dissertation, University of Toronto, 2000), 136, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/10492/1/NQ54054.pdf.

[25] Arthur W. Biddle, *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice* (The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 2001), 280; See Letter to Robert Lax, July 10, 1964.

Francine du Plessix Gray echoed Merton when she wrote, "Thomas Merton was 'the most skillful interpreter of Zen Buddhism in the West . . . Daisetz Suzuki, the greatest scholar of Zen Buddhism in Japan, once remarked that no Westerner had ever understood Zen as well as Merton.'"[26] This was indeed high praise coming from one who consistently expressed his belief that Westerners were not endowed with the same ability to experience enlightenment as those from the East.[27] In his article *The Zen of Japanese Nationalism* Sharf records a conversation between Hisamatsu Shin'ichi and Suzuki which was recorded at Harvard in 1958:

> *Hisamatsu*: Among the many people you've met or heard of (in the West) is there anyone who you think has some understanding of Zen?
> *Suzuki*: No one. Not yet anyway.
> *Hisamatsu*: I see. Not yet. Well then, is there at least someone you have hope for? (Laughter)
> *Suzuki*: No. Not even that.
> *Hisamatsu*: So, of the many people (in the West) who have written about Zen there aren't any who understand it?
> *Suzuki*: That's right.
> *Hisamatsu*: Well, is there at least some book written (by a Westerner) which is at least fairly accurate?

---

[26] Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions, 1995), back cover.

[27] Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 28-29. Sharf chronicles Suzuki's nativist and *noniron* leanings from pages 25-29. He concludes, "Having lived through the military humiliation of Japan at the hands of the "culturally inferior" Occidental powers, Suzuki would devote a considerable portion of his prodigious energies tantalizing a legion of disenchanted Western intellectuals with the dream of an Oriental enlightenment. Yet all the while Suzuki held that the cultural and spiritual weaknesses of the Occident virtually precluded the possibility of Westerners' ever coming to truly comprehend Zen. One is led to suspect that Suzuki's lifelong effort to bring Buddhist enlightenment to the Occident had become inextricably bound to a studied contempt for the West, a West whose own cultural arrogance and imperialist inclinations Suzuki had come to know all too well."

Suzuki: No. Not to my knowledge[28]

This conversation took place before Merton's published writings on Zen as well as before his personal meeting with Suzuki in 1964. Whether Merton possessed an appropriate appreciation for Zen can be debated, however, Suzuki's approbation certainly enhanced the appreciation among Westerners regarding Merton's authority in matters of Zen.

Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh met on only one occasion during a visit by Nhat Hanh to the Abbey of Gethsemani. Over a very short period, however, the two developed what came to be called *engaged spirituality*. Nhat Hanh's concern with peace in Vietnam was echoed by Merton and influenced him to write the anti-war essay *Nhat Hanh Is My Brother* in which he addressed their mutual understanding regarding the Vietnam War and the need for peace. Their relationship has in some ways become an icon of what is possible within inter-religious dialogue and bolstered Merton's reputation as a Westerner with a true understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist concerns.

Having seen now the positive influence of Merton upon a variety of predominant Christian and Buddhist figures, we will now turn to those with a more critical view of his work.

Criticism of Merton's Work

Reviewing the literature, I have found no book length work critical of Thomas Merton. This is astonishing considering the profound influence and controversial nature

[28] Ibid., 28.

of his work. As Robert E. Daggy, director of the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine University observes:

> Most of what has been written has been done by scholars and writers who admire Merton, who feel he has made a significant contribution to the twentieth century, who find continued attention to his life and work valuable. There has, of course, been negative criticism, during his life and since, and that is as it should be – one reviewer recently concluded that Merton was not much of a literary critic; many regarded his protest against the Vietnamese War with alarm; several have found his involvement with the nurse disconcerting – yet few seem to have found the total Merton experience unedifying and useless.[29]

One of the reasons I chose to write on Merton and Zen is to attempt to balance from an academic perspective the overwhelming positive disposition of most writers regarding Merton in general, and his relation to Zen in particular. Scanning the titles of books and articles one is hard-pressed to find any critical analysis of Merton, let alone his understanding of Buddhism or Zen. As mentioned above, his personality cult is such that he is almost always referred to as a "saint" or "prophet" or "mystic" not only in popular books and articles, but in many academic articles as well. Nevertheless, there are some critics, at least on the popular level, who have challenged the high appraisal of Merton.

There are indeed many biographers and commentators who point out the trials, controversies, and scandals of Merton's life and writings, however, they invariably interpret these in a positive light as stepping stones toward spiritual, intellectual, or

[29] Robert E. Daggy, "The Three Temptations of Thomas Merton," review *of The Tragedy of Thomas Merton* by Alice Jordain Von Hildebrand, *The Merton Seasonal* 12, no. 2 (1987): 13-15.

psychological maturity.[30] One must scratch deeply to uncover negative criticism regarding the controversial aspects of Merton's life and works. The few examples of negative criticism, however, generally view Merton as having been, to some degree at least, mentally unstable. His later writings are viewed as not representative of Catholic thought, and the result of a divergence from the monastic rule to which he had vowed his life.

Few of these criticisms, however, are academic in nature. Rather, they tend to express the opinions of various Merton readers. Various Evangelical websites, for instance, portray Merton as introducing a form of contemplation to Christians that they understand to be unbiblical and promoting a private form of revelation apart from the Christian scriptures. Many of these websites reveal a poor understanding of Christian monasticism and Catholicism in general, but join with others who see Merton's involvement in Eastern thought as having led him to a form of contemplation that is fundamentally different from what developed organically within Christian monasticism.

[30] See for instance Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1994); James Forrest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, 2008); Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (Liguori Publications: Liguori, 1995); Mark Shaw, *Beneath the Mask of Holiness: Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2009); Michael Higgins, *The Unquiet Monk: Thomas Merton's Questing Faith* (Novalis Publishing Inc.: Toronto, 2015); Anthony Padovano and Jonathan Montaldo, *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton* (Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2014). All these biographies address the weaknesses and scandals of Merton's life, but inevitably end by interpreting this issue in a positive form. Even *Beneath the Mask of Holiness* by Shaw which intentionally delves into the seedier events of Merton's life concludes that these events had a positive effect upon Merton's personal development. Michael Mott's biography – the only authorized autobiography – is by far the most thorough and honest, yet despite enumerating Merton's many problems – emotional, psychological, spiritual, and moral – his appraisal of Merton as a spiritual person is very positive.

In his article "Can You Trust Thomas Merton?" Anthony E. Clark highlights the enormous influence Merton has had within the field of spirituality in general and within the Catholic Church in particular.[31] Clark notes that toward the end of his life Merton tended to diverge from orthodox Catholicism in favor of an East/West syncretism that emphasized a non-dualistic view of reality as well as the Buddhist doctrine of salvation arising from one's own efforts - two aspects of Eastern thought Clark claims are very appealing to modern Western spiritual seekers.[32]

Alice Von Hildebrand, a popular Catholic writer, in a lecture titled *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton*, contends that Merton succumbed to the fatal influence of communism, psychoanalysis, and oriental mysticism.[33] On his website *Super Flumina* Babylonis writer Michael Baker expands on Von Hildebrand's negative assessment in an article with the same title.[34]

A more academic account of Merton's mental state is found in a series of articles written by Joseph M. Kramp published in *Pastoral Psychology* in 2007. The titles of the articles: *The Suicide of Thomas Merton* and *Merton's Melancholia* (parts one and two) give an idea of the direction Kramp takes in his assessment of Merton. While Kramp's conclusion that Merton committed suicide appears unfounded, based merely on Kramp's

---

[31]Anthony E. Clark, "Can Thomas Merton Be Trusted?," *Catholic Answers Magazine* 19, no. 5, (2008).

[32]Ibid.

[33] Alice Jordain Von Hildebrand, *The Tragedy of Thomas Merton* (North Haledon, New Jersey: Keep the Faith, Inc. (1986).

[34] Michael Baker, "The Tragedy of Thomas Merton," *Super Flumina Babylonis*, last modified March 4, 2007, http://www.superflumina.org/merton_tragedy_1.html.

assessment of his mental state, he does offer an alternative view of Merton's condition that varies drastically from the common theme of mental fulfillment. Kramp maintains based on the psychoanalytic study of Donald Capps, Eric Erikson, and Sigmund Freud, that Merton's "early identity and religious development formed deep conflicts in his psyche. These conflicts remained unconscious and unresolved, leading to disastrous consequences."[35] While Kramp's assessment is speculative at best, due to his never having met Merton himself, his acknowledgment from a psychoanalytical perspective that Merton was deeply disturbed raises the question as to why so few, if any, academic studies consider the effects of his mental condition upon his writings, interests, and actions.

Conclusion

Merton's influence upon spirituality and interfaith dialogue was indeed powerful. The vast majority of writers involved in the study of his works present him as having broken new ground in numerous ways, as having reached the height of spiritual awareness, and having improved the mutual understanding of Catholics and Buddhists. Few critical writers acknowledge let alone address the effects Merton's mental state had upon his writings or how they may have motivated his interest in Eastern religions. This paper seeks to address these factors and determine if Merton's interest in Zen was the result of an authentic quest for spiritual fulfillment or perhaps the result of a less noble ambition, and if so what ramifications this has for his work and influence.

[35] Joseph M. Kramp, "The Suicide of Thomas Merton and Merton's Melancholia," *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 5 (2007): 619-635.

CHAPTER TWO

Merton's Early Development

No life evolves in a vacuum and innumerable forces play upon one's development even from before birth. It seems likely therefore, that a better understanding of Merton's later interests will be gained by first looking outside his life in the monastic and Christian environment and focusing upon the context of his early life apart from these influences. Was there something in Merton's intellectual and existential development early on, that predisposed him for a positive encounter with the Zen movement in America? Was there something that predisposed him to alternative paths of spirituality in general? In this chapter I will examine Merton's early life from the time of his birth in France in 1915 to his entry upon the monastic life. These early years formed Merton's world-view, honed his temperament, and etched out the characteristics that would follow him throughout life.

There are several themes which developed in Merton's early life and constantly resurfaced that I believe can help direct us to a working understanding of Merton's stance toward Zen, his own as well as other religions, and the social issues of his day. As his biographers note, Merton was restless, he was in some ways rebellious[36], and in many ways, a solitary figure from his youth. It appears to me these characteristics played off each other. The solitude in which he found himself, and which he could not bear,

[36] Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 65. This attitude was noted as early as his days at Oakham where he began school in 1929. He was described years later by a headmaster as follows: "He is something of a legendary figure among the old boys of his generation and he was clearly something of a rebel."

inflamed his restlessness, which, in turn, expressed itself in rebelliousness. His frustration and, at times, disgust with his personal life, however, ceaselessly drove him to new ground. If he found no relief in his current situation he would explore another path until he found something that served to relieve the tension resulting from his experience of life. This was true for his thought as well.

Merton viewed the world through the experience of his own life; much of which he realized was a mask, a lie, or an attempt to run from reality. He saw the goals, personal and social, which motivate most human endeavors, as alienated from reality, causing these endeavors to be futile and corrupt.[37] His soteriology, then, developed along the lines of a true encounter with existence that could overcome the alienation inherent in human experience.[38] That was his objective soteriology; what developed in his life, I will argue, was something much different.

Merton's ideas did not always develop gradually; at times, entire revolutions occurred, sparked by situations in which he found himself. It seems his ideas were not always thought out so well, however, but instead flowed from his highly critical nature. He was not shy of being critical of anything and he expressed this criticism in his

[37] Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 527. For instance, in his journal for July 5, 1968 – just five months before his death – he writes concerning his reading of Kierkegaard's *Attack upon Christianity*, "The book is so uncontrovertibly *true*. And to find myself a priest. And to find my own life so utterly false and trivial – in the light of the New Testament. And to look around me everywhere and find people desperately – or complacently – going through certain motions to prove that they are Christians." Such self-condemnatory remarks and social condemnation are common throughout Merton's journals from his university days on.

[38] Ibid., 50.

writings. His writings, therefore, do not always manifest a developed thought, but reactions to events personal, religious or political in nature.[39]

Early on, Merton understood himself and the world to be radically alienated and sought a path beyond this alienation. The early years of his life reveal a process of dissatisfaction, searching, trial and error, all the way through to his entry into the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey outside Louisville, Kentucky three days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. As we shall see, however, this process of dissatisfaction, searching, and trial and error would become a constant theme of his life as the last line of his autobiography intimated.[40]

Restlessness and Rebelliousness

Merton's deep experience of alienation consisted in a pervasive restlessness and rebelliousness that accompanied him throughout his life. This shadow of depression was

[39] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Cf. 158-163. For instance, Merton expresses his admiration for communism because it's anti-war stance reflects concern for the "common man" over against the authority of the powerful. When the communists suddenly want to go to war, however, Merton grows cold toward them. His critique of communism is not based on reflection upon its creed or principles (which may lead or not lead to war, depending on the situation), but upon concrete actions that directly influence people's lives: he hates war and any system that resorts to war. In terms of personal issues, his lack of awareness is demonstrated, for instance in his belief that he was being seriously considered as a contender in various abbatial elections, particularly in the abbatial election at Gethsemani in 1968, when in fact he was not being considered at all (cf. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 503-504).

[40] "Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi," *The book is finished, the search goes on.* Merton's autobiography was quite unusual being written as such an early age. The official publication date is October 11, 1948; however, he had sent the first draft to his publisher in 1945, making him just about thirty years old at the time. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 462.

so pronounced it has led several authors to question whether Merton committed suicide.[41] In Merton's official biography, Michael Mott observes in Merton's writings a peculiar fascination with the topic of suicide; one that I found as well while reading through his journals. When describing a rejection from a woman Merton experienced Mott relates:

> Tom was careful to note in the New York newspapers the next day that a man on one of the liners in New York harbor had committed suicide on the night he was gently turned down. What was then a depressing mental note became in time the first of a number of carefully placed references to suicide in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[42]

Mott ultimately considered the possibility of suicide unlikely. However, while claims that Merton committed suicide appear to be no more than conjecture, they point out the depth of the inner struggle and frustration evident in his life. The idea of suicide was certainly on his mind as evidenced by what Mott describes as "carefully placed references" in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Were these references a subliminal cry for help or a silent shout of desperation? I do not think one would dismiss such a conclusion

---

[41] Cf. John Cooney, "Thomas Merton: The Hermit Who Never Was, His Young Lover and Mysterious Death," *The Irish Times*, last modified January 22, 2018, http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/thomas-merton-the-hermit-who-never-was-his-young-lover-and-mysterious-death-1.2422818; Joseph M. Kramp, "The Suicide of Thomas Merton: Moral Narcissism, Contemplative Prayer, and the Religion of Humor," *Pastoral Psychology*, 55 no. 5 (2007), 628. While the idea that Merton committed suicide has been bandied about, it is primarily conjecture and no evidence has come to light that he did so. Much of the controversy arises from the unfortunate fact that his death was poorly investigated, and the scene was almost immediately cleaned and disturbed by various individuals, making sound judgment regarding the circumstances of his death virtually impossible. Kramp's assertion that Merton did, in fact, commit suicide appears baseless in terms of the physical evidence, however, as a psychologist he appears to base his assertion upon the overall direction of Merton's life.

[42] Mott, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 59.

out of hand after reading his journals. By his own admission Merton was not the tranquil contemplative he is often portrayed to have been. He was tightly wound to say the least.

Restlessness

Merton begins his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* with the words, "On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born."[43] *The Seven Storey Mountain* was written between the years 1944 and 1948 at the bequest of Merton's Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne (Abbot from 1935 – 1948) who had an enormous influence upon Merton's early monastic life, especially his writing career.[44]

Before entering the monastery Merton had a highly idealized understanding of the life involved there, seeing its work as a path to freedom and integrity and comparing the monastery to a veritable Garden of Eden.[45] Later, with his work of writing dominating

---

[43] Ibid., 3.

[44] Ibid., xi.

[45] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 1, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation, 1939-1941* (New York: Harpercollins, 1996), 336. Merton writes about Trappist life while on retreat at Gethsemani about eight months before he entered as a postulant: "The Trappist uses work to save his soul. To be as little children, we must play like them, do things not because they are physically necessary, but *freely*, as if arbitrarily, almost: for love. Behind the strictness of the Trappist's discipline is this complete metaphysical freedom from physical necessity that makes it, ontologically speaking, a kind of play. This use of work as play to save the monk's soul results, indirectly, in the abbey being an earthly paradise – because the work necessarily produces results, in this case, are a perfect community, a marvelous farm, beautiful gardens, a lovely chapel, woods, the cleanest guest house in the world, wonderful bread, cheese,

the greater part of his life, together with an enormous upheaval in the way of life at Gethsemani,[46] this understanding evolved into a source of much personal anguish, instigating, already by the time he finished his autobiography, an embattled mentality within the young monk.[47] Even here, however, in the first words of his autobiography, we can already sense not merely a note, but a tone of desperation directed at himself, at the world, and at existence in general. We hear the words of a man questioning the realities involved in human life, and in his life in particular; a life born into conflict, contradiction, and loneliness.

Merton views himself as a child, as one alienated from the world, from himself, from his fellow man, and from the God he sees as his source of being.[48] Merton's

---

butter – all things make this abbey the only really excellent community of any kind, political, religious, or anything, in the whole country."

[46] Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Hartcourt, Inc., 1953), 4-6.

[47] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 459-461. Merton wrote in a soliloquy to God within a year of making his solemn profession of vows on March 19, 1947: "You have me walking up and down all day under those trees, saying to me over and over again, 'Solitude, solitude.' And You have turned around and thrown the whole world in my lap. You have told me, 'Leave all things and follow me.' And then You have tied half of New York to my foot like a ball and chain [reference to publishers and inteviews]. You have got me kneeling behind that pillar with my mind making a noise like a bank. Is that contemplation? . . . By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was, or what the contemplative vocation was, or what my vocation was, and what our Cistercian vocation was . . . Because You have called me here not to wear a label by which I can recognize myself and place myself in some kind of a category. You do not want me to be thinking about what I am, but about what You are. Or rather, You do not even want me to be thinking about anything much: for You would raise me above the level of thought. And if I am always trying to figure out what I am and where I am and why I am, how will that work be done?"

[48] In these opening words Merton appears to be painting the effects of *original sin*. Before entering the monastery, Merton had already studied various Scholastic writings and 20th century commentaries such as those by Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain (cf. *Run to the Mountain* pgs. 83–86, where he discusses the differences between Augustinian

religious quest was largely directed at overcoming this alienation he saw within the totality of existence, an alienation manifested in the earliest years of his life.

Desperation and flight were resounding themes in Merton's childhood. He writes, "My father and mother were captives in that world [World War I France], knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it – not because they were saints, but in a different way; because they were artists."[49] The title of his biography itself is a reference to the seven levels of suffering and spiritual healing experienced in the ascent of the mountain of Purgatory as depicted in Dante's *Purgatorio* to which he alludes often in his writings.

Throughout his early autobiographies[50] Merton viewed his life as a pilgrimage of healing, enlightenment, and progressive communion with God. His own artistic nature in some sense pitted him, along with his father and mother, against the world in which they were all trying to exist and understand: "I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the

---

and Thomistic theology; pgs. 135–138 where he discusses *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola; pgs. 275–279 where he discusses the *Itinerarium of* St. Bonaventure; pgs. 291-295 where he discusses St. Anselm's *Prosogion*). In this theology, alienation from the natural world, from oneself, one's neighbor, and from God are the natural and necessary results of the original turning away from communion with the Creator.

[49] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 3.

[50] While *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the most celebrated of Merton's autobiographies and his works as a whole, he also wrote several subsequent books, including *The Sign of Jonas, Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation* that were largely autobiographical in nature and gleaned from his journal writing during his years at Gethsemani. The published autobiographical works are more polished versions of his journaling and were also subject to the censorship of his religious order.

mess the world is in, and some of her versatility."[51] Although his parents shared the commonality of an artistic nature, they otherwise expressed between themselves many contradictions that appear to have been embodied in Merton's own temperament.[52]

Merton was a wanderer for much of his youth, continued to desire to wander even after taking a vow of monastic stability, and ended his life wandering about Southeast Asia.[53] He identified himself as an artist, but often saw his writing as an obstacle to spiritual growth. He continued to be drawn throughout his life to silence and solitude, but enmeshed himself in relationships outside the monastery as well as overwhelming controversy and correspondence.

From his earliest days Merton saw himself as one chained to vice and full of discord. He wrote regarding his baptism as a child, "But I don't think there was much power, in the waters of the baptism I got in Prades, to untwist the warping of my essential freedom, or loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul."[54] With the

---

[51] Ibid, 4.

[52] Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 8. Padovano writes, "The contradictions that characterized Merton's life were already present in his parents. Owen was tolerant, laissez-faire; Ruth was intense, an intrepid journal keeper and diarist. Ruth had a strong sense of herself that made adherence to formal religion distasteful. Owen saw in organized religion possibilities for personal growth and enrichment. Owen was a wanderer who did not require constant contact with a family, even his own, for survival. Ruth was rooted in relatives and sought ties with people."

[53] Merton died on December 10, 1968 in Bangkok, Thailand. He had entered the monastery on December 10, 1941 at the age of 26. He died 26 years to the day after.

[54] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 6.

death of his mother when he was but six years of age a spirit of depression and darkness appear and seem to follow him throughout the remainder of his youth.[55]

Following the death of his wife, Thomas' father Owen threw himself full-throttle into the wandering life of the artist, traveling throughout Western Europe, North Africa, the East Coast of North America and the Caribbean, usually with young Thomas in train. Merton seemed to live for no more than a few months in any one place, changing schools as rapidly as the seasons. When he could not accompany his father on his journeys he would be left with friends of his father who were, nonetheless, generally strangers to the young boy; each town, each house, each family departing his acquaintance as rapidly as it was made.[56] He knew there were such things as "normal" families and homes, but they were outside his experience. Despite the great love that apparently bound the hearts of father and son, Merton grew up on his own, at times, making decisions regarding his own living arrangements and schooling that one's parents generally make.

This sense of autonomy appears to have greatly encouraged Merton's willfulness and disdain for authority to the point that at the time of his father's death when he was

---

[55] Cf. Merton's words describing reading his mother's note informing him she was dying and that he would never see her again, "I took the note out under the maple tree in the back yard, and worked over it, until I had made it all out, and had gathered what it really meant. And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child, with pangs of sorrow and many tears. It had something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief, and was therefore all the more of a burden because it was, to that extent, unnatural." Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 16.

[56] Merton writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, "It is almost impossible to make much sense out of the continual rearrangement of our lives and our plans from month to month in my childhood. Yet every new development came to me as a reasonable and worthy change. Sometimes I had to go to school, sometimes I did not. Sometimes Father and I were living together, sometimes I was with strangers and only saw him from time to time. People came into our lives and went out of our lives. We had now one set of friends, now another. Things were always changing." See pages 20-21.

16, he understood himself to be an atheist who knew more about the world than most everyone and who, therefore, was quite capable of leading his own life even if it was to no other goal than degeneracy.

Perhaps he had grown wary of love. He wrote, "As a child, and since then too, I have always tended to resist any kind of a possessive affection on the part of any other human being – there has always been this profound instinct to keep clear, to keep free."[57] The circumstances of his youth seem to have created a fortress mentality, or at least a cynical doubt at the possibility of home, of love, of God. One of the few social features of his youth that receives praise from Merton is that of the peasants of the French countryside among whom he lived briefly.

One French peasant family, the Privats, with whom he was sent to live for a summer at the age of eleven, instilled in him an understanding of Catholicism he had never known. His time with the Privats awakened in him a wholesome vision of life very much foreign to his experience to that point. This was an experience he idealized and which he eventually came to see mirrored in the simple life of the monks at Gethsemani. The Privats are the first people Merton comes to love and he explicitly states that he was able to love them because their love "did not burn you, it did not hold you, it did not try to imprison you in demonstrations, or trap your feet in the snares of its interests."[58] These words may be quite telling in understanding the coolness with which Merton eventually came to view his community at Gethsemani, and in particular, his second abbot, Dom James Fox.

---

[57] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 63.

[58] Ibid., 61-65.

While French peasants scored high on Merton's list of social influences, French schools were a different story altogether and his time at the French Lycée along with the rough and unforgiving French boys was not much different than confinement with the crude rabble of cut-throat society of any inner city.[59] Although his childhood was rapidly coming to a close, his restlessness was to considerably deepen and manifest itself in a more aimless and destructive fashion.

The general instability, coldness, and alienation of Merton's personal life seem to have mirrored the condition of the world at large. The early 20th century was a time of great social and political upheaval involving in the East the rise of Japanese nationalism and the fall of the Qing dynasty, and in the West, the eruption of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. In his mid-teens Merton began to witness in the Great Depression the apparent death throes of capitalism and the beginning of the great ideological battle for economic and military world domination that would shadow the remainder of his life. This was all on the world scale, but chaos and alienation ruled also at the local level.

Merton repeatedly laments throughout *The Seven Storey Mountain* the fabricated and empty nature of modern European society. He rails especially against the higher French and English social classes and the absurdity of English mores and customs that defined the shallowness of the culture.[60] This criticism of modern culture and convention continued throughout his life, at times, becoming severe and almost brutal. Yet, in his autobiography, he realizes he is the child of this culture and reflects this culture in

[59] Ibid., 55-57.

[60] Ibid., cf. 57, 81–83, 87-89.

everything he does. In fact, he mentions in several places in his journals that he and his brother and friends were all personally responsible for the foulness of the society in which they lived as well as for the political upheaval already occurring in the late 1930's.[61] To his mind, they were a generation of lost individuals.

One of Merton's biographers and founding president of the Thomas Merton Society, Anthony Podavano, suggests that Merton's troubled adolescence and young adulthood had its origin in the lack of identity in his early childhood. He writes:

> His childhood was not happy; the wildness of his young adulthood was the symptom of an emptiness he could not fill. His life journey was both search and flight. He longed for home and yet felt strange everywhere. He fled from himself and his friends partly because he was restless, partly because he feared affection as much as he needed it, partly because he had been so often abandoned by those he loved.[62]

---

[61] After having to leave Cambridge as a result of fathering a child out of marriage, Merton came to the juvenile conclusion about his profligate life that ". . . it was not so much myself that was to blame for my unhappiness, but the society in which I lived . . . I was something that had been spawned by the selfishness and irresponsibility of the materialistic century in which I lived" (Cf. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 147). During the process of his conversion, however, he came to see things 180 degree differently placing the blame for the state of society upon his own shoulders; he writes, "They [the general population] did not realize that the world had now become a picture of what the majority of its individuals had made of their own souls. We had given our minds and wills up to be raped and defiled by sin, by hell itself: and now, for our inexorable instruction and reward, the whole thing was to take place all over again before our eyes, physically and morally, in the social order, so that some of us at least might have some conception of what we had done . . . There was something else in my own mind – the recognition: 'I myself am responsible for this. My sins have done this. Hitler is not the only one who has started this war: I have my share in it too . . .'" pgs. 271-272. In his journal entry for September 30, 1939 he wrote, "The whole world is filled with the blood and anger and violence and lust our sins and self-will have brought upon us, my own sins as much as anybody else's: Hitler, Stalin are not alone responsible. I am too, and everybody is, insofar as he has been violent and lustful and proud and greedy and ambitious." See Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 31.

[62] Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 9.

Merton always seems to be attempting to overcome his restlessness by somehow "arriving" at a place where he would finally be at peace. As a young boy, the family flees from the war in France and although he becomes use to living in Douglaston, New York after his mother's death, he never feels at home and considers it a great triumph when his father takes him journeying along the East Coast the entire summer.

Back at Douglaston with his grandparents for no more than a few weeks, he is once again swept off to Bermuda to live primarily with strangers until he returns to Douglaston to live with his grandparents for two years. He is then off to San Antonin in France where his father builds a home only to abandon it just before its completion and Merton begins life anew in England.

Eventually entering Cambridge to pursue a career in the diplomatic corps, he is discreetly expelled from the university in his second year. His "academic life" was dominated by frequent drunkenness, womanizing, and little study. Mott writes:

> Almost from the start, from the first October days of the Michaelmas term, 1933, Merton's time at Cambridge was a disaster. It was a very long time before he could be philosophical about this, or feel that it was not, entirely, "the place's fault" . . . Merton soon had other companions at Cambridge, most of whom seemed to have been on the proctors' books for the hundred and one university crimes that came under the general heading of "conduct unbecoming a gentleman."[63]

The good times came to a sudden halt when he fathered a child. His guardian, a longtime friend of his father, arranged to pay off the woman's family, and Merton returned to New York to start life anew at Columbia University. As Padovano states, "His life journey

[63] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 74-75.

was both search and flight." It is a theme that dominated his early life and would define him to the end.

As the sub-title to Padovano's book implies: "Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century," it was this constant restlessness that made Merton's autobiography so appealing. It may not have been what Merton was teaching that resonated so much with people as the fact that his life embodied the restlessness, lust, and insatiable nature of 20th century America. His modus operandi of engagement and flight, witness and distrust and his seeming inability to commit himself mirrored the increasing insecurity and mistrust within the West and the United States in particular.

Eric J. Scheske remarks in his article *Three American Sophomores: the Restlessness of Thomas Merton, J. D. Salinger & Jack Kerouac*, that at the root of all religious experience is restlessness and that Merton's works addressed this restlessness, but went astray in the end as he ultimately began to once again succumb to the restlessness he sought to escape.[64] Merton's reversion to restlessness will be discussed in more detail, but Scheske underscores the seriousness of Merton's condition in writing, "He was a restless and, in a way, disturbed individual, having suffered a difficult childhood (his mother emotionally abandoned him when he was a toddler in favor of his younger brother, and died when Merton was only six; after her death, his father provided little stability . . ."[65] Merton's restlessness didn't represent the typical insecurities of young people, but was much deeper, perhaps even pathological. It fueled behavior that

[64] Eric J. Scheske, "Three American Sophomores: the Restlessness of Thomas Merton, J. D. Salinger & Jack Kerouac," *Touchstone* (US) 13, no. 8 (2000): 32-33.

[65] Ibid.

resulted in his abandoning his child and its mother,[66] undermined his quest for a diplomatic career, and prevented him from establishing committed intimate relations as a young man. This appears to be more than the typical wanderings of youth and represents a much deeper aspect of his character that would return to plague him later in life.

Many have noted that much of Merton's restlessness may have been due to the unfulfilled relationship he had with his mother and the sense of abandonment by his father while they were in the Bahamas. Merton also relates, however, an important event that took place while on a ship from England to the United States when he was fifteen. His Grandfather had asked him to return home for the summer and while on the ten-day voyage he fell in love with a female passenger twice his age. Merton writes describing the conclusion of their acquaintance the night before the debarked in New York:

> I made a declaration of my undying love. I would not, could not, ever love anyone else but her. It was impossible, unthinkable. If she went to the ends of the earth, destiny would bring us together again. The stars in their courses from the beginning of the world had plotted this meeting which was the central fact in the whole history of the universe. Love like this was immortal. It conquered time and outlasted the futility of human history. And so forth.
>
> She talked to me, in her turn, gently and sweetly. What it sounded like was: "You do not know what you are saying. This can never be. We shall never meet again." What it meant was: "You are a nice kid. But for heaven's sake grow up before someone makes a fool of you." I went to my cabin and sobbed over my diary for a while and then, against all the laws of romance, went peacefully to sleep.
>
> However, I could not sleep for long. At five o'clock I was up again, and walking restlessly around the deck. It was hot. A grey mist lay on the Narrows. But when it became light, other anchored ships began to appear as shapes in the

[66] While living a quite licentious lifestyle at Cambridge Merton fathered a child. This was the occasion that undermined his career goal as a diplomat, as well as his attendance at Cambridge. There was a financial arrangement made by Merton's benefactor that allowed him to depart England and return to the United States. Nothing is mentioned in Merton's writings concerning the identity of the woman in question, the child, or their fate.

> mist. One of them was a Red Star liner on which, as I learned from the papers when I got on shore, a passenger was at that precise moment engaged in hanging himself.[67]

Many young men experience the pains of being "rejected" at an early age; it is part of growing up. For Merton to have concluded his description of this event by noting, rather out of place and context, the suicide of another male passenger emphasizes, I think, the depth of the trauma Merton was experiencing, not perhaps regarding this event alone, but about his attempts at intimacy altogether. It seems to me the revelation of his relationship with this woman, who is twice his age, also reveals his relationship to his mother and to all people whom he has come to love. He is rejected and as a result he loses hope to such an extent that suicide, the end of life and its meaning forces its way into his mind and thoughts. After having returned to England and entering Cambridge University his relationships with women continued to be a series of failures devoid of intimacy.

It was at Columbia, however, that Merton finally began to establish some sense of intimacy and direction through several significant relationships with professors and friends. It was also at Columbia, in the context of these relationships, that he began to take seriously his passion for writing. Both his relationships and his writings initiated a journey of self-examination and direction that would lead to the doors of Gethsemani.

Having reviewed Merton's youth and life as a young adult we see a man who grew to be deeply involved with the social issues of his time, a man almost desperate to express his ideas as a literary artist, and a man engaged in a profound search for the meaning of his own existence. We also see a man crippled by restlessness and

---

[67] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 99-100.

desperation, a man at times wallowing in depravity and blown about by the winds of his passions. Above all, perhaps, we see a man on a journey who concludes the account of his own youth with the words *Sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi* (The book is ended, but the search goes on).[68] Even within the walls of his monastery and vowed to a life of stability, however, Merton is still not at rest. The frustration from his inability to quench his restlessness eventually resulted in another quality predominant in Merton's youth; a spirit of rebelliousness.

Rebelliousness

Rebelliousness can be legitimate or illegitimate, mature or immature, nonviolent or violent, but it is always a reaction *against* something, and to that extent it does not result from genius or inspiration, but conflict. Rebelliousness, per se, produces nothing and has no direction, but is defined and determined by that against which it rebels. Rebelliousness can offer no more than a parody of autonomy, thoroughly unoriginal and inherently defensive. To say that Thomas Merton was a rebel is not to reduce his work to parody or convention since much of his work did not derive from rebellion.[69] Rebellion was, however, a dominant theme in his written works as well as his life.

We have seen that in many ways Merton was a restless wanderer, we will now look at rebellion as a theme in his life. This will provide a platform for an investigation into how this theme was manifested in his thought and written works. Understanding Merton's rebelliousness and how it manifested itself through his early actions and

---

[68] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 462. Translation, mine.

[69] Merton's early monastic works on Christian spirituality and the history of the Order of Cistercians, for instance, are far more centered and removed from his personal life.

writings, will help us see how it continued to play a determining role in his later actions and writings, and in a particular manner, its influence upon his relation to Zen, his later stance on social issues, as well as monastic renewal.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton reflects upon his rebellious nature and comments that it manifested itself early on. He recalls comments in his mother's diary about his stubborn, unpredictable behavior. He compares the serene attitude of his younger brother John Paul, who would lull the other family members to rest at the end of the day with his singing in bed, to his own tantrums and refusals to retire.[70] Padovano asks, "Why did he forever keep people at a distance with his humor, his unconventional behavior, his perverse tendency to do something that would confound their expectation and unsettle them with its unconventionality? . . . He could be so rough with others, so harsh."[71] Padovano surmises that much of this rebellious attitude stemmed from Merton's lack of affection and a home as a child. Perhaps he felt he was not worthy of affection or intimacy and his contrary nature developed as a sort of insulation against what he experienced as foreign and unsettling.

Merton mentions two events that he feels foreshadowed his contrary nature. The first was his introduction to Greek mythology through an innovative form of education his mother had adopted. He writes that it was from the actions of these mythic heroes that:

> . . . I unconsciously built up the vague fragments of a religion and of a philosophy, which remained hidden and implicit in my acts, and which, in due

[70] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 5-9.

[71] Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 17.

> time, were to assert themselves in a deep and all-embracing attachment to my own judgement and my own will and a constant turning away from subjection, towards the freedom of my own ever-changing horizons.[72]

The second incident he relates is about a stained-glass window behind the altar of the Zion church he attended occasionally while accompanying his father who played the organ for the choir. The window was of an anchor and represented for him an ironic aspect of his character. Though the purpose of the anchor was to symbolize the theological virtue of Hope and stability, for the young Merton, it only conjured up desires for travel on the high seas, adventure, and heroism, "with myself as the hero." He states that is was odd that a symbol of stability and Hope should inspire in him a spirit of capriciousness.[73]

The anchor is of even more interest as an ironic symbol once one considers the end of his monastic career. "Stability," which Merton explicitly mentions in reference to the anchor, along with Conversion of Manners, are the two perpetual vows that Cistercian monks take upon profession. The vow of stability binds the monk for life to the particular monastery in which he makes his profession. In the evolution of Christian monasticism, the vow of Stability was incorporated into monastic profession in response to the ongoing difficulty of wandering monks, or gyrovagues, falling into desultory lifestyles.[74]

---

[72] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 12.

[73] Ibid., 14.

[74] St. Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict In English*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 20. The Order of Cistercians, to which Merton belonged, adopted the Holy Rule of St. Benedict. In his first chapter, "Of the Kinds or Life of Monks," after mentioning the

These two incidents concerning Greek mythology and the stained-glass window are early indications of what Merton considers to be an obstinate quality of pride in his character. He sees himself and his own experience as the ultimate arbiter of truth; at the school of Oakham during his teenage years in England he is the consummate sophomore:

> Finally, when I arrived at Oakham several days after the beginning of the term I was convinced that I was the only one in the whole place who knew anything about life from the Headmaster on down
>
> I was now a house prefect in Hodge Wing with a great big study . . . And my bookshelf was full of a wide variety of strange bright-colored novels and pamphlets, all of which were so inflammatory that there would never be any special need for the Church to put them on the *Index*, for they would all be damned *ipso jure* – most of them by natural law itself.
>
> For it had become evident to me that I was a great rebel. I fancied that I had suddenly risen above all the errors and stupidities and mistakes of modern society – there are enough of them to rise above, I admit – and that I had taken my

---

Cenobites and Anchorites, or Hermits, St. Benedict writes: "But a third and most vile class of monks is that of Sarabaites, who have been tried by no rule under the hand of a master, as gold is tried in the fire (cf Prov 27:21); but, soft as lead, and still keeping faith with the world by their works, they are known to belie God by their tonsure. Living in two's and three's, or even singly, without a shepherd, enclosed, not in the Lord's sheepfold, but on their own, the gratification of their desires is law unto them; because what they choose to do they call holy, but what they dislike they hold to be unlawful. But the fourth class of monks is that called Landlopers, who keep going their whole life long from one province to another, staying three or four days at a time in different cells as guests. Always roving and never settled, they indulge their passions and the cravings of their appetite, and are in every way worse than the Sarabaites." These words of St. Benedict are apropos because Merton has been criticized as rebellious for demonstrating similar behaviors. In particular, in this regard, is Merton's insistence that he be allowed to live as a hermit apart from the community when his Abbot consistently said he was not ready for such a life and the general party atmosphere that was often associated with visitors to Merton's hermitage once he was allowed to establish one. These events together with the development of a romantic relationship shortly before his death as well as his insistence that he be allowed to travel extensively outside the monastery, make Merton appear in the eyes of certain critics to be guilty of the very behavior St. Benedict is addressing in the first chapter of his rule. This will be discussed at more length when we turn to Merton's later life as a monk. I mention this here to point out that Merton, even as a newly professed monk, recognized the irony of the anchor's symbolism. He was always well aware of his propensity to instability even when professing his vow of stability.

> place in the ranks of those who held up their heads and squared their shoulders and marched into the future.[75]

He begins to imagine himself as a sort of maverick. He writes about having gotten inside a speak-easy and says, "And when I found out that the place was raided a few days later I grew so much in my own estimation that I began to act as if I had shot my way out of the wildest joints in town."[76] Describing himself as a fifteen-year-old at Oakham he writes:

> . . . the way began to be prepared for my various intellectual rebellions by a sudden and very definite sense of independence, a realization of my own individuality which . . . took an unhealthy egotistical turn. And everything seemed to conspire to encourage me to cut myself off from everybody else and go my own way.[77]

In a very telling account of his experience on the ship traveling from New York to England with a group of college girls in the summer of 1931 he writes:

> Anyone older than myself symbolized authority. And the vulgarity of the detectives and the stupidity of the other middle-aged people who had believed all their stories about us fed me with a pleasantly justifiable sense of contempt for their whole generation. Therefore I concluded that I was now free of all authority, and that nobody could give me any advice that I had to listen to. Because advice was only the cloak of hypocrisy or weakness or vulgarity or fear. Authority was constituted by the old and weak, and had its roots in their envy for the joys and pleasures of the young and strong.[78]

---

[75] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 102-103.

[76] Ibid., 100.

[77] Ibid., 84.

[78] Ibid., 102.

Soon after, while suffering a severe infection of gangrene in his mouth and thinking he was about to die he felt nothing but apathy toward life or death and professed his creed to be "I believe in nothing."[79] He writes that as a young college student he was, "full of anger and impatience and ingratitude towards my family to an extent it is horrible to think about now" and that "even as a child I was too full of anger and selfishness . . ."[80] While his sense of apathy and bouts of anger would rise and fall, his critical attitude and tendency toward contempt would remain with him throughout his life.

With this mindset, he develops as an adult a persistently harsh and critical viewpoint that can be observed throughout his pre-monastic diaries. While there is a break in Merton's critical expression during his first years as a monk, there is a return to this harsh, even vitriolic and sarcastic critique, after his ordination and continues throughout the rest of his life. He criticizes writers, politicians, philosophies, and religions. He criticizes events, restaurants, movies, and the personal appearance of various people. Behind most of his criticism is contempt for ignorance and convention.

It seems, however, that what Merton is really criticizing is himself. The alienating qualities within his own character and mindset are what Merton sees reflected in the world about him. He can point them out because he is so familiar with them in himself. He is fortunate and blessed, however, because unlike much of humanity, he knows these things to be true about himself and is therefore open to salvation, while the

[79] Ibid., 108.

[80] Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 34-35.

world continues in ignorance of the cancer growing within. His rebellion against the world is a rebellion against his own ignorance, sinfulness, selfishness, and pride.

Merton does not become conscious of this until his time at Columbia University. It is at this point that he begins to identify his own actions and those of his peers as the cause of the chaos and suffering in the world. It is also at this time that he begins to call into question Western values and policies, and begins to seek for alternative answers to social ills such as communism, pacifism, and Eastern philosophies. He sees the West as driven by an obsession of self-interest, escaping from life in a meaningless quest for the accumulation of material possessions, power, and entertainment.

In his pre-monastic journal Merton develops an interesting analog between grammar and social order. He observes that people in general completely misunderstand the nature of grammar, seeing it as a set of rules imposed upon language to maintain its uniformity and ability to communicate. Rather, the rules of grammar merely express the inherent nature of language itself as a living, developing reality. When these rules become too rigid, language begins to fail for want of creativity and the ability to address what is new. This situation is mirrored in rigid societies; the Nazi state, for example, or even some democracies represent "The imposing, on man, of rules from the outside: standardize him, stamp him with rubber stamp characteristics . . . He must be such and so: his soul, character, must be formed according to rules formulated outside him . . ."[81] Life, like language that gives intelligent expression to it, must be allowed room to grow and experience beyond the confines of any individual, narrow perspective such as he witnessed within English society, Nazi Germany, and capitalist America. This is also

[81] Ibid., 42.

how he eventually came to view life at Gethsemane and much of the monastic culture of the 20th century.

At this time, writing in 1939, he sees the influence of the Catholic Church in contrast to all this as an organic, inherent, inspiration of God "directed by the milder and widely flexible rules of a Church guarded and instructed by the Holy Spirit, which believes that every moral case should be judged on its own merits, and has immense respect for the *individuality* of every man's soul."[82] For Merton, it is the imposition of arbitrary, thoughtless convention against which one must rebel and the shackles of which one must throw off. Early on he sees these shackles manifested in authoritarian figures and societal norms that appear baseless to him. As a young man, he sees the same restrictions on liberty reflected in the rule of states. Later, within the confines of the monastery and the monastic rule, he will also come to view the Church, which he had earlier held forth as a beckon of light and liberty, as capable of tyranny as well.

It is clear, though, that in his early writings, his novels and journals, he began to express to some extent at least, the anger and frustration he experienced in life. Writing provided Merton a creative protest against the world and a non-violent outlet for inner turmoil.

While Merton did not attribute much importance to his venture into communism, it is revealing to see what it was about communism that attracted him. Primarily, it seems he admired communism not for its own sake, but as an alternative to the alienating influence of capitalism.

[82] Ibid.

While at Columbia he saw war as an expression and result of Western greed and materialism. It was at this time he joined in communist protests against war, making a promise along with other students never to support war. He notes the irony, however, that within a few years it was the communists themselves who were beating the war drum.

He also reflects upon his naïve attraction to communism as an answer to exploitation. His joining with the communists was an expression of his own outrage against injustice, but he did not think through or consider adequately enough the objectives of the communist party. This naïveté and failure to think things through continued to be a problem throughout his life, one for which he was often criticized.[83]

His impulsiveness may be seen also in his conversion to Catholicism as well as his decision to become a religious and finally to enter Gethsemani. In describing his conversion Merton does not so much enter into the intellectual aspects of rejecting certain ways of thought in favor of others, although he does record this process to some extent. What he emphasizes is the emotional experience. Describing his decision to become Catholic he writes:

---

[83] See, for instance, William Theodore de Barry's "Thomas Merton and Confucianism: Why the Contemplative Never Got the Religion Quite Right," *Source: First Things* 211 (2011), 41-46; regarding his understanding and quest for solitude see John F. Teahan's "Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton's Life and Writing" *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 50 no. 4 (1982), 521-538. Paul Bernadicou notes that "critics had pointed out their lack of clearly thought-out theological structure and the absence of a supporting, stabilizing spirituality. Even carefully wrought books like Merton's *Contemplative Prayer* could seem obfuscated by the spiraling swirl of his evolving thought." See Bernadicou, S.J., Paul. "The Eastward Turn of Thomas Merton," *Science et Esprit* 34, no. 3 (1982): 351.

> I took up the book about Gerard Manley Hopkins. The chapter told of Hopkins at Balliol, at Oxford. He was thinking of becoming a Catholic. He was writing letters to Cardinal Newman (not yet a cardinal) about becoming a Catholic.
>
> All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice.
>
> "What are you waiting for?" it said. "Why are you sitting here? Why do you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?"
>
> I stirred in the chair, I lit a cigarette, looked out the window at the rain, tried to shut the voice up. "Don't act on impulses," I thought. "This is crazy. This is not rational. Read your book."
>
> Hopkins was writing to Newman, at Birmingham, about his indecision.
>
> "What are you waiting for?" said the voice within me again. "Why are you sitting there? It is useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?"
>
> . . . Suddenly, I could bear it no longer. I put down the book, and got into my raincoat, and started down the stairs. I went out into the street. I crossed over, and walked along by the grey wooden fence, towards Broadway, in the light rain.
>
> And then everything inside me began to sing – to sing with peace, to sing with strength, and to sing with conviction . . .
>
> I saw Father Ford coming around the corner . . .
>
> "Father, may I speak to you about something?"
>
> "Yes," he said, looking up, surprised.
>
> "Father, I want to become a Catholic."[84]

Those familiar with the story of the conversion of St. Augustine will surely hear some echoes in these lines as Merton attempts to dramatize this central moment in his life, however, the urgency of his mindset reveals a characteristic common in his decisions; that of leaning toward emotion when making decisions. It is present again when he decides to enter Gethsemani, when he desires to leave Gethsemani to become a Camaldolese hermit, when he is justifying his affair with "M," and when he fights what he sees as injustice. There is little true analysis of the objective situation, but much appeal to emotions.

[84] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 235-236.

We see then, that Merton possessed a propensity to rebellion. This was most likely the result of many factors among which stand at the fore are an unresolved frustration with authority figures and frustration with his personal moral shortcomings.

In his autobiography Merton expresses plainly the pain he felt resulting from the emotional and affectionate distance his mother placed between them. On the other hand, he paints the picture of his relationship with his father in very positive terms. As his biographer, Michael Mott, points out, however, there was a significant portion of his earlier drafts that Merton himself edited out of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[85] This material presents a very different picture, one that better explains Merton's lifelong struggle reconciling his youth. This struggle is manifested discreetly in many of his writings, but particularly in the poetry of his later years.

Merton never seems to have come to terms with the deep rejection he felt from both his parents. He laments on numerous occasions his ongoing difficulty with establishing intimacy, trust, and commitment. While he has the propensity to idealize individuals and structures, he also tends to find a way to tear them down.

This attitude is manifested toward himself as well, as he consistently refers to the unstable nature of both his thought and his character. It is almost as though he has a reluctance to admit any stability at all whether in others, in institutions, or in his own life; when he does commit himself, the commitment is soon undermined by his own criticisms. His attempt to escape the alienating influence of institutions and societies may mask a fundamental inability to commit himself.

[85] Mott, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 21.

Conclusion

Is Merton seeking spiritual freedom and liberty in his unrelenting critique of individuals and institutions or escape from the demands and change that correspond with commitment? His own biographies as well as the accounts of his life by others show a young man deeply restless, without a sure anchor in life in either his mother, his father or in terms of a home, school, society or religion. These accounts also chronicle the development of a pervasive critical attitude toward all and sundry, with little respect for any form of authority or institution. These are recurring characteristics in Merton's life that I believe influenced the choices he made during his later monastic experience. It is these very characteristics that led in the end not to the flowering of a spiritually centered individual, but one attempting a desperate escape from the need to face himself.

CHAPTER THREE

The Monastic Journey Part I

A common assumption regarding Merton's involvement in Zen is that he no longer felt fulfilled in his monastic tradition, or that he had somehow surpassed what Catholicism had to offer. According to this notion, Merton discovered in Zen a way of avoiding the limitations of the conventions and dogmas of Catholicism.[86] In this chapter we will review the first period of Merton's monastic experience at the Abbey of Gethsemani to gain a solid understanding of the development of his mindset from the time of his postulancy to the time his interest in Zen began to develop in the late 1940's. Was his interest in Eastern thought the climax of his spiritual journey or was it based primarily on a desire to bridge religious traditions; or was it, as I argue, largely an evasion from the demands of his own monastic and contemplative tradition.

---

[86] See, for instance, Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (Garden City, New York: Double Day and Company Inc., 1970), pg. 137. Rice, Merton's close friend from Columbia, wrote regarding Merton's departure for his Asian journey, "The gates of Gethsemani had closed behind him: like the Count of Monte Cristo, he had cut himself out of the sack." In the novel by Alexandre Dumas, the "Count of Monte Cristo" had been imprisoned in a notoriously brutal island prison for seventeen years which he spent in solitary confinement and was beaten and starved on a regular basis. He finally escaped by cutting himself free from a sac used to haul dead bodies into which he had secretly hid himself. See also Rice's comments on page 91 regarding Merton's rejection of Western thought. One Merton biographer, Anthony Padovano, remarks, "Merton wanted to transcend arbitrary human limitations and thereby become a universal symbol. He wanted to harmonize in himself East and West, past and present, secular and sacred." Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 14. In another place Padovano writes, "Standing before the Buddha at Polonnaruwa he enters into contemplation: 'I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.' Thomas Merton journeyed a long road from the days of his simple Eucharistic piety and the unsophisticated hagiography of *Exile Ends in Glory*." Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 29.

Continuing the investigation into Merton's propensity to restlessness and rebelliousness, as well as the development of his writing career, I believe it can be shown that while there may be more than one answer, a single answer is predominant: at a crucial point in his monastic development Merton, for various reasons that will be discussed, was unable to commit himself to the demands of the spiritual path within the Catholic tradition. This inability or unwillingness caused the outward movement and diversification of his writings, his thought, and ambitions.

Comments on Merton's attitude toward the Cistercian order and the Catholic Church are across the board. As we saw in the first chapter, some like Dom Jean Leclercq regarded Merton as perhaps the greatest Cistercian since St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Some, such as Alice Von Hildebrand believed he had all but lost his vocation and his faith.[87] Others believe he had positively rejected Catholicism and had no intention of returning from the East when the conferences he was attending at the time of his death had ended. It is apparent to me that both the first and last of these conjectures are exaggerated evaluations.

Although the overall evaluation of Alice Von Hildebrand seems positively untenable by many Merton admirers within the Catholic Church, it does seem to me closer to reality. His own journals reveal clearly that while Merton died a monk of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance and had no intentions of abandoning his Catholic faith, he had nonetheless seriously questioned his vocation *from the time he entered the monastery*. In fact, the confliction between his obsession with writing and notoriety and a simultaneous and compelling desire for solitude and contemplation were

[87] Von Hildebrand, "The Tragedy of Thomas Merton."

present before he ever entered the gates of Gethsemani. When in November of 1941 he was trying to discern whether he should work with the poor in Harlem or enter the Trappist order he wrote in his journal:

> The good reasons do not apply only to Harlem. I would have to renounce perhaps *more* to enter the Trappists. That would be the one place where I would give up *everything* . . . As to the independence – and writing! Be prepared to give them all up. It seems monstrous this minute, that I should think of my writing as having any particular importance – that is, enough to get mixed up in this problem. If God wants me to write, I can write anywhere . . . Going to Harlem doesn't seem like anything special – it is good, and is a reasonable way to follow Christ: but going to the Trappists is exciting and fills me with awe, and desire: and I return to the idea 'Give up *everything – everything!*' and that means something.[88]

Nor was this a superficial struggle, but one that went to the core of who he believed himself to be. It was a question with which he struggled all his life, yet never came near to settling. [89]

---

[88] Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 456. Emphasis his.

[89] This same inability to commit himself also seems evident in his later years in terms of his relationship with Eastern faith traditions. While he cherished his role as a Zen authority in America he never abandoned his faith in Christ and the Church even though many core tenets of Zen are irreconcilable with the Catholic faith. While certain Zen writers seek to accentuate the uniqueness of Zen in relation to Buddhism in general, it nevertheless holds to a number of core Buddhist tenets that oppose it to Catholicism. The following are some notable conflicts: the Buddhist doctrine that one must look only to oneself for salvation is fundamentally at odds with the Catholic doctrine of salvation by grace through Jesus; Catholicism is fundamentally dualistic in its understanding of existence viewing the absolute, infinite existence as God and creation as a completely contingent existence that has no inherent being of its own; the Buddhist belief in a supernatural order as ultimately a distraction from suchness and things as they are, whereas Catholicism views God as the focus of existence and the only Absolute being; Karma is also a central Buddhist doctrine shared by Zen that is irreconcilable with the Catholic doctrine of Divine Providence; Avidya as the cause of Dukkha rather than a severance of one's relationship with God. If Merton was convinced of the truth of Zen,

Although he stressed the need to maintain faithfulness to the tenets of one's own faith tradition and even promoted the idea that one of the main purposes of exploring other faith traditions is to deepen the understanding one has of his own tradition, Merton could not escape, at least implicitly, ignoring what he himself considered irreconcilable differences between Eastern and Western spirituality and Zen Buddhism in particular. As will be shown in a later chapter, his treatment of Zen uses notions of Catholic doctrine in such an ambiguous fashion that it is at least fair to question whether he is even speaking anymore as a Catholic. He describes his interaction with Zen as the sharing of experience and explicitly and intentionally avoids questions of doctrine.

In this chapter we ask the question, how did Merton arrive from being immersed as a young monk in the Catholic mystical tradition, attempting to abandon himself to the will and direction of his abbot and the constitutions of his monastic order, to outright rejection and ridicule of his abbot, his monastery, central aspects of Cistercian spirituality, and the embrace of existentialism and Zen? Was this a gradual maturation of his thought and experience as so many claim or, as I intend to show, the result of abandoning the spiritual path in favor of an escape into the self? My intent in this dissertation is not to discern Merton's evaluation of Catholicism in relation to Zen, but to show that *for Merton Zen became a means of justifying his escape from a crisis of faith*.

It appears to me, reading through Merton's comments on prayer in his journals, that he constructed an impossible dichotomy between prayer and activity. He knew well from his study of the Cistercian Rule and spirituality that the maxim of St. Benedict, *ora et labora* – prayer and work, was not intended to oppose or isolate the two activities, but

---

why did he not focus his attention and effort upon zazen? This will be discussed in later chapters.

integrate them fully so that all one's work becomes prayer and all one's prayer becomes "the work of God," or liturgy. One's whole life as a monk must become a continuous liturgical action of sacrifice, worship and prayer. Yet in July of 1949, after eight years in the monastery and already a solemnly professed monk and priest he writes:

> Not that I haven't made efforts to keep my head above water, but in the spiritual life it is not so hard to drown when you still imagine you are swimming. Activity is already so strong in my nature, and it is piled on me by the circumstances of this abbey, but beyond that, my mind goes on rushing into business, carried away by the sheer power of its own momentum. This morning after Chapter we first had to wash the breakfast dishes, which is fine. I am glad of the merit, and it is a grace to be able to do some such chore rather than my own will. Perhaps I pleased God more by swabbing out those new aluminum coffee tins we have than I would have done sitting outside in the cool shadow of the west transept and desperately hoping to pray. Nevertheless, when the dishes were finished, I lost time window shopping in the last questions of St. Thomas' *Secunda Secundae*.[90]

A year earlier in August of 1948 he wrote in his essay *Contemplation in a Rocking Chair*:

> The impact of the *bourgeoisie* on Christianity has had the same characteristic features as its impact on every other department of life. It has produced a huge network of evasions and substitutions all around the fringe of Christianity . . . And thus the bourgeois spirit tends to work its way into Catholicism in order to get rid of the real thing and replace it by a cheap imitation. The purpose of this is the usual one: *to evade the trouble of leading a complete, integral Catholic life* by substituting sentiment for virtue, emotion for charity, formalities for prayer and exterior gestures for self-denial and sacrifice.[91]

---

[90] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 2, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer 1941-1952* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 341-342.

[91] Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton: Early Essays, 1947 – 1952*, ed. Patrick f. O'Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 95.

It appears that Merton had succumbed to the very bourgeois spirit he railed against in his essay. Why could washing dishes not be prayer? Why could studying St. Thomas not be prayer? Why does he pit these wholesome and charitable actions against "sitting outside in the cool shadow of the west transept and desperately hoping to pray."? It is because, despite all his protestations to the contrary, he doesn't want to pray. He wants to evade prayer and the annihilation of self that prayer would demand. Rather than fulfill the Rule of his order by washing dishes out of love for Christ and his brother monks he would rather enjoy the leisure of sitting in a rocking chair alone and quiet.

Yet even when in the 1960's he would have ample opportunity for solitude and silence with his own hermitage and having been relieved of his office of novice master, rather than pray he continued to occupy his time and energy to writing, entertaining guests, corresponding with numerous individuals outside the monastery, and listening to Bob Dylan and Joan Baez on his own record player. All this while his brother monks slept in a common dormitory, had only family members as guests a couple days a year, received letters only from family members, worked in a smelly cheese factory, and listened only to the Gregorian Chant sung with their own imperfect voices which Merton took numerous occasions to mock and criticize.

I think it is important to point out here the true dichotomy between what Merton taught in his essays and books and what Merton lived. It epitomizes his modus operandi: know what you must do to fulfill your vocation as a contemplative monk, then do all you can to frustrate this. Was Zen truly a way Merton was finally able to integrate action with contemplation or was it another evasion, another toy for his intellect? Whether or

not he took Zen seriously would answer the question, but we must postpone that question until later. Here I am concerned with motivations.

What motivated Merton to do the things he did? Why did he spend hours each day writing, studying and corresponding while habitually complaining he had no time to pray? Later, Merton would claim that engagement in prophesy was necessary for monks if they were to survive. In his last letter to Dom Leclercq in 1968 he wrote, "Those who question the structures of contemporary society at least look to the monks for a certain distance and critical perspective . . . The vocation of the monk in the modern world . . . is not survival but prophecy."[92] It appears, however, that Merton may be using prophecy as a means of personal survival.

During the 1940's, Merton's vocation, although never tranquil, was progressing in appearance at least and he believed himself to be growing spiritually. During the mid-1950's, however, a distinct break occurs during which Merton begins to drift rapidly from reliance upon the traditional Western/Catholic spiritual path to a gradual preference for existential philosophy and Eastern mysticism. Those writers are correct who point out that Merton's interest in Eastern spirituality began in the late1930's, especially with his interest in the writings of Aldus Huxley,[93] however, until the 1950's his evaluation of

---

[92] John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 68.

[93] Regarding his exposure to Eastern religions Merton wrote on November 27, 1941: "I spent the whole afternoon writing a letter to Aldous Huxley and when I was finished I thought "who am I to be telling this guy about mysticism" and now I remember that until I read his *Ends and Means* just about four years ago, I hadn't known a thing about mysticism, not even the word. The part he played in my conversion, by that book, was quite great . . . All this reading covered a period of a year and a half, or two years – during which I read almost all of Fr. Wieger's translations of Buddhist texts – without understanding them." Merton, *Run to the Mountains*, 454-455.

Eastern philosophies was generally negative, and he did not begin to incorporate principles of Eastern thought into his own spiritual practice until the mid-1950's.

One might argue that it was only at this point that Merton gained a mature understanding of Eastern thought through his personal correspondence and meetings with individuals such as D. T. Suzuki, John C. H. Wu, Thich Nhat Hahn and others. Yet these relationships and his newfound deep interest in Eastern thought corresponded in time to a series of crises in Merton's life that were manifested in deep bouts of depression, drunkenness, swimming parties with various women at the monastery lake, a prolonged affair with a nurse with whom he fell in love during a stay in a hospital, frequent departures from the monastery without permission, and a steady chain of visitors to his "hermitage" for drinks and jazz sessions. As already mentioned there appear to have even been several instances in which Merton may have contemplated suicide.

This was the period during which Merton came to consider himself an authority in Zen based on his tutelage under Suzuki. It seems fair to ask, given the state of his life and psychological makeup, whether Zen had become for Merton another form of escape rather than the fruit of a supposed maturation of thought. The same could be said of Merton's explosive interest in politics, social justice, and maintaining a "prophetic voice." Were such interests truly the flowering of contemplation or evasions from contemplation?

The nature of Merton's struggles is recorded quite frankly in his journals as well as in the remarks of close personal friends. We will now follow the chronological development of Merton's experience during his early life in the monastery through several culminating events occurring roughly contemporaneously: his solemn profession

of vows (March 19, 1947), the publication of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* (July 7, 1948)[94], the election of Dom James Fox as the new abbot (August 23, 1948), and his ordination to the priesthood (May 26, 1949). I will focus upon the main themes of his journal notes: his spiritual consciousness, discerning his vocation, the role of writing in his spiritual life, and his quest for silence and solitude. This will be done as well with an eye to his consistent tendency toward restlessness and rebellion.

Early Monastic Experience 1941-1948: Monk or Writer

Without doubt, the most obvious theme in the journal and autobiographical writings of Merton during the 1940's and 1950's was the battle in his mind and heart between the great desire he expressed for living the contemplative life and the development of his talents and ambitions as a writer.[95] Numerous entries remark upon the problem that writing created for his spiritual life. The problem of the interference created by writing is soon expanded to the problem of excessive activity in general, and then to the overall direction of monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

In the closing pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, written just before he made solemn profession of monastic vows, Merton voices his frustration at the fact that he has little time to pray and that the monastic life has come to involve too much activity for contemplation to develop. This frustration had been maturing for years as evidenced by

[94] This is not the date of the actual publication, but when Merton first received a copy of the printed book and learned of its enormous success. After submitting the manuscript to the Cistercian censors and the publishers, he learned only what was communicated to him through his abbot. News of the books great success was truly a great surprise for Merton. See Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 217-218.

[95] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 212.

early entries in his monastic journals relating how his first abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, had first encouraged him, then ordered him to continue writing poetry and other works for the monastery.

Despite Merton's apprehension that this activity would distract him from prayer, the abbot desired to update the monastic literature for the benefit of the hundreds of young men seeking entry to the monastery following World War II. Not only was he to write poetry, but an introduction to the Cistercian life, an introduction to contemplation, the biography of a famous Cistercian Abbess (*Exile Ends in Glory*), a history of the Cistercians in America (*The Waters of Siloe*), his own autobiography (*The Seven Storey Mountain*) – and all this while he was still a novice and simply professed monk. At the least, one could certainly question the prudence of burdening the young monk with such enterprises.

As Mott points out, however, Abbot Dunne came from a family intimately involved with books and writing and was in no way prejudiced against monks writing if it was for their own spiritual good and that of the Order. He had, in fact, already granted the unusual privilege of writing to another monk, Fr. Raymond Flanagan, whose writings were helping the monastery on a practical level, bringing in funds and inspiring vocations.[96] Precedent had been set and it appears Abbot Dunne saw no harm in, not only encouraging, but requiring Merton to write. On March 16th, 1947, just two days before his solemn profession, Merton wrote, "I went to see Father Abbot yesterday. Once again I asked him if I could stop writing poetry . . . and he said "No" to everything. By this time, it ought to be quite clear to me that Reverend Father is set on my writing

[96] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 212-213.

books."[97] The abbot wanted Merton to learn how to make writing a fulcrum for contemplation, but Merton's continued apprehension shows he never quite learned how.[98]

On August 31, 1947 Merton wrote, "I thought for a moment, and with nostalgia, of the old days when I got so much consolation out of the Cistercian Fathers and the history of the Golden Age of the Order – the bright fall days four years ago when I opened Migne and found St. Ailred. But God has taken all the joy out of what was then a brave new world." The passion he experienced upon entering the cloister seems to have ebbed and been replaced with a new reality; one of dryness and emptiness that demanded to be filled. Writing served this need well and Merton indulged in the evasion consistently.

Despite Merton's attempt to show he was writing under obedience, he does not hide the fact that he believed this activity was harmful to him precisely because it inflamed his pride and ambition that worked in diametrical opposition to a tranquil state of mind and the annihilation of self he was hoping to achieve. This conflict he experienced between being a monk and being a writer did not diminish as the years advanced, but continued and deepened.

---

[97] Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 31.

[98] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 47. On March 16, 1947 Merton writes, "But when I saw Reverend Father yesterday he would not give me permission to stop writing altogether. In fact I went in to see him and started in at once trying to introduce the subject of avoiding too much activity and remaining in solitude and being a contemplative and, before I could get fairly started, he began blocking me all along the line. So at any rate one thing is perfectly clear. Reverend Father is set on my writing books. He says, 'it must be a prayer," and "must help prayer." But so far as I can see, it isn't and doesn't.'"

The Desire for Solitude

From the first years of his life as a monk in simple profession Merton began to entertain the thought of transferring to a monastic order oriented completely to contemplation such as the Camaldolese or Carthusians.[99] He had expressed this possibility on numerous occasions to both his confessor and Abbot Dunne, but was consistently told he was being tempted and that Gethsemane was where he was being called.[100] From the time of his entry into the monastery he made resolution after resolution to put the thought of a transfer out of his mind, but with no success.[101] At the same time that he complained vehemently that he had no time to pray, however, he

[99] Other than a few notes on the life of Abbot Dunne, there are no entries in Merton's published journals between April 3rd, 1942 and October 26, 1946. It is clear from remarks made toward the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, however, that he had already begun questioning whether he should join a more contemplative order. He had given the manuscript for the book to his literary agent Naomi Burton in 1945, so the frustration expressed in his autobiography were already developed within his first three or four years at Gethsemane. The first direct reference in his journals about leaving Gethsemane and joining the Carthusians are from December 24, 1946 when he writes, "One day when I was in Father Abbot's room, complaining that I was not the contemplative or the solitary that I wanted to be, that I made no progress in this house and that I ought to be either a Carthusian or an outright hermit, Dom Frederic casually remarked that there were some men in the house who could come to him and tell him their troubles and go out quite satisfied with whatever answer he gave them." Merton then acknowledges he is not such a man, but that some of that simplicity is necessary for the monastic life and he hopes to gain it in the future. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 33.

[100] See, for example, Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 40; Merton writes, "I went and talked over the whole business of my vocation again with Father Abbot and he assured me once again, patiently, that everything was quite all right and that I am a fool."

[101] See, for example, journal entries for December 29, 1946, January 7, 1947, Merton, *Entering the Silence.*

chastised himself for continuously creating new writing projects that were totally within his discretion to begin or leave aside.[102]

It is within this context, in my opinion, that we see Merton begin to displace his frustration with himself upon his superiors and the Cistercian order in general. While it is undoubtedly true that with the election of Dom Fox as abbot the abbey was undergoing dramatic changes in its operation and atmosphere,[103] it is equally clear that the "lack of time" for contemplation and increase in occupations about which Merton complains so

---

[102] Cf. Merton, *Entering the Silence*. May 2, 1947, "It seems to me that it would be a much cleaner and healthier thing to break off with all this business and bury myself in solitude, absolute poverty, hiddenness, nothingness, to love God alone, giving up all these activities and all this racket of writing. I know I shall never do that altogether. I believe God wants me to write *something*, but to be always up to my neck in censors and contracts and royalties and letters all around the world and reviews and correspondence with my dear reader . . . I don't know." May 4, 1947, "Is there a theological fault in these desires, this interior activity which I cannot help, these continual ideas for books and writing, this continual grasping for intellectual satisfactions and aesthetic joys – the avidity which is my crucifixion? That is not the question. It is all disordered. It chokes grace, dries it up. Stifles prayer. It wounds, darkens, dirties, lacerates my soul." September 25, 1947, "However, my big struggle is to empty myself of useless projects, useless ideas, and not burden myself with still more than I have got at the same time continuing to complain." September 28, 1947, "Why don't you finally do something about emptying your memory and imagination: people, places, things, books, ideas for work – forget them, they are unimportant. They are not your vocation." October 12, 1947, "What is the use of all my lamentations about not being a contemplative if I don't take advantage of all the opportunities I get for prayer?" October 26, 1947, "Reverend Father gave me permission not to write any more 'if it is a burden,' but he wants me to "reach souls."

[103] Fox was a former Naval officer and graduate from Harvard Law School before entering Gethsemani in 1927. After his election as abbot he rapidly began changes in the operation of the monastery from a primarily agrarian society in which the monks themselves produced by hand everything they needed to a commercialized, mechanized corporation aimed at producing a profit with which other monastic foundations could be funded. These changes were for Merton a source of great animosity toward Dom Fox that continued the rest of his life. Rather than seeing the changes as Fox's way of helping the order, Merton always interpreted each change as an expression of greed and power through which the monastery was losing its reason for existence.

often during this period where largely of his own design and were factors present long before Dom Fox's abbatial election.

The monastery dormitory was full from the time Merton had entered, and for several years before his solemn profession there were monks sleeping in the hallways and under stairways. Furthermore, the monks who did sleep in the dormitory had only small cubicle walls separating them, work was rarely carried out alone, the monks did their studying and reading together in the library, and, of course, the liturgy which occupied a third of their day was conducted in community in the monastery church. It was cenobitical[104] living to the furthest possible extent and the pressure of constantly living in close proximity to others was intentional; designed to work as a grinding stone chipping away at the monk's pride and self-centeredness. There was no place to run and no place to hide.

Merton recognized the value of this in fostering humility, the annihilation of self, and fraternal love. It was one of the distinguishing features of Cistercian life. He was adamant from these early years onward, however, that contemplation necessitated

[104] Two forms of Christian monasticism have evolved over the centuries. The first Christian monks were hermits living in the Egyptian desert who had fled the compromised life of Christians in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Roman Empire. After some time, monasteries began to arise near these populations of hermits. In these monasteries, or cenobiums, the monks lived in common and provided for the hermits. In the 5th and 6th centuries the cenobium became far more common throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe as they provided the monks with much needed protection and structure following the collapse of the Roman Empire and the ensuing attacks from the various barbarian tribes and Islamic forces. The eremitical tradition survived much more intact in the Eastern church, but was revived in the West with the establishment of the Carthusian and Camaldolese orders in the 11th and 12th centuries. It was to these orders that Merton became extremely attracted after beginning his monastic life at Gethsemani.

solitude. While inner solitude was desirable it was exterior solitude that fostered the inner solitude, and allowed it to take root and deepen.

The question arises then, was Merton's great desire for solitude driven by an equally great desire for contemplation or by a desire to flee the very self-annihilation contemplation brings about? Solitude in itself is of no value and is even antithetical to the Christian understanding of communion derived from the mystery of the communion within the Godhead of the Holy Trinity. It can be of great value, though, if it inculcates and fosters the quieting of the intellectual faculties; the imagination especially.

Nevertheless, even one who lives in absolute solitude may possess a mind fraught with activity, entertaining itself, fleeing from a truly penetrating view of reality, gripping one within the spell of phantasy and illusion. Rather than benefiting from the solitude to quiet the mind, for some the solitude impels them to mental distraction to escape the confrontation with the inner-self solitude usually brings about.

Merton was aware of this and of his own tendency to evade, writing on September 28, 1947, "Why don't you finally do something about emptying your memory and imagination: people, places, things, books, ideas for work – forget them, they are unimportant. They are not your vocation."[105] The cenobitic life was forcing Merton to forget these very things, things at odds with contemplation, but Merton was seeking out solitude. It was during Merton's limited time of daily solitude that his imagination found free expression and desire for fame, another way of life, ambition, in a word – escape. We witness in his journals the beginning of his monastic life to his death a continuous litany of frustrations in which Merton chastises himself for using his solitude to work and

[105] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 123.

engage in varied other activities having little or nothing to do with his desire for contemplation.

Sudden Fame

On March 19, 1947 Merton made his solemn profession as a monk and on May 26, 1949 he was ordained a priest. In between these two dates perhaps the most providential event occurred in Merton's life: the publication and enormous success of his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[106] It would be difficult to underestimate the impact this had upon the newly professed monk.

From his early years, Merton had yearned for success and recognition as a writer; now in the confines of the cloister he suddenly and unexpectedly achieved this goal beyond his wildest imaginations. The success of this publication made him an international celebrity and had considerable impact upon how he was viewed within the monastery itself. What hope Merton entertained for solitude and anonymity vanished virtually overnight. He began to receive streams of letters daily, requests for interviews, new publications, literary reviews, speeches, spiritual direction and an abundance of simple fan mail.

Despite the concerns he consistently voiced regarding the detrimental influence of writing upon his spiritual life Merton's abbot and spiritual director continued to encourage his writing and allowed him to engage in a much broader levity of

[106] The title to Merton's autobiography is a reference to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Dante' work, following his descent into Hell, there are seven levels to the mountain of Purgatory he must ascend before he can enter the celestial realm. Merton viewed his life previous to the monastery as a series of purgations each of which taught him new truths that led him finally to his conversion and entrance into the monastic life.

communication with those outside the monastic enclosure. Merton's success as a writer produced a great financial and vocational boon for the Trappist order, and at the same time profoundly affected Merton's own development as a monk.

Following Merton's publication success hundreds of young men approached the gates of Gethsemane and other Trappist monasteries seeking entrance to the monastic life. Abbot Dunne rarely turned anyone away and the monastery soon became greatly overcrowded to the extent that many monks were sleeping in the hallways, under stairs and any place a bed roll could be laid.

It was at this time that Merton was permitted to take up residency in the manuscript vault. This afforded him some extra privacy and solitude, most of which, however, was devoted to further writing. With new writing contracts, the monastery enjoyed unprecedented financial help which funded new monastic foundations in Utah, California and other locations. The apparently providential turn of events converting Gethsemani from a virtually unknown monastery to a center of spiritual interest in the United States was a welcome "problem" that was seen in a positive light.

In my opinion, it is difficult to judge how much the focus of Merton's superiors upon the success of the monastery clouded their understanding of Merton himself and whether they seriously disregarding his spiritual well-being. Merton's struggle with writing was so profound and complex. He had a great tendency to deflect personal responsibility upon others to escape the necessity of facing an issue. In the context of understanding his bent toward restlessness I bring up Merton's writing to highlight the reality that throughout Merton's first eight to ten years as a monk he consistently and to a

large extent unnecessarily engulfed himself in the very occupation he considered fatal to his vocation as a contemplative.

As I noted earlier, the primary struggle Merton experienced already in his early years as a monk was the confliction between his desire for solitude and contemplation on the one hand, and the excessive activity imposed upon him by his monastic obligations, principally, his obligation to write. This is how Merton tended to frame the problem, at least. It becomes very clear to one reading his journals, however, that this conflict was essentially contrived. He blamed his abbot for requiring him to write, when in fact he was not under any obedience to write as he did. He blamed both Abbot Dunne and Abbot Fox for the crowded conditions and excessive activity while he consistently failed to make use of the opportunities for solitude and quiet when they presented themselves. The dearth of solitude he consistently laments was largely of his own making since he had ample time to be alone and pray which he chose to spend writing works he was not required to write and engage in correspondence in which he was not obliged to partake.

It appears that Merton would have been served far better by his superiors if he had not been encouraged to write. Reading the journals, one wonders how they could not recognize that writing was a great distraction and source of frustration for Merton. On the other hand, the journals represent Merton's side of the story. It seems that he greatly exaggerated the "orders" of his superiors to write and if they had really placed him under obedience *not* to write he very well may have been unable to cope with it since writing had already become such an identifying feature of his life. It is important to realize, however, that whenever Merton is portraying a moral issue in his mind he is prone to

exaggerate tremendously and divert responsibility away from himself to justify continued activity for which he does not want to acknowledge direct responsibility.

Solemn Profession and Ordination

In the midst of his confusion regarding writing and solitude it eventually came time for Merton to make his solemn profession of monastic vows (March 19, 1947) and be ordained to the priesthood (May 26, 1949). Preceding both events Merton was highly agitated about his place and role at Gethsemani. He was not in doubt about his vocation, but how he could fulfill his vocation as a contemplative in the conditions in which he found himself. On February 20, 1947, just one month before taking his final vows he wrote: "I went and talked over the whole business of my vocation again with Father Abbot and he assured me once again, patiently, that everything was quite all right and that this was where I belonged. In my bones I know that he is quite right and that I am a fool. And yet, on the surface, everything seems to be all wrong."[107] Two weeks later (March 9, 1947) his questions persist:

> The only question I have ever asked about this vocation is whether I don't belong with the Carthusians, because of the greater solitude, strictness (?), isolation and silence. However, I have been told to drop all that – at least until after I am ordained priest, which I will try to do . . . Anyway, God knows where He wants me and there is no doubt about the coming vows. They are all I desire.
>
> By them I mean to get rid of everything I can get rid of by that kind of an act, so as to dispose myself for getting rid of all the other attachments that are harder to shake off because even vows cannot shake them.
>
> Solitude – not to pay attention to what goes on in the community – the accidents of community life that don't concern me – differences of opinion, other people's ideas of the spiritual life – the kind of organ music that some people like: all that is meaningless. My only job is not to be occupied with such things.

[107] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 40.

> *Too much activity*. I got permission to ask Reverend Father for permission to give up writing verse. It is a terrific nuisance, and it keeps my mind on myself and on images and ideas. It is a big smokescreen, and chokes the only thing that matters, which is the simple contemplation of God without useless acts. That is the thing I am made for – made for Eden, and I insist on laboring in the briers. Yet it is very difficult to keep from being that kind of fool. It is one of the hardest things I know – to keep myself from doing what is hard and unrewarding and which deprives me of what is easy and full of reward.[108]

Merton's understanding of contemplation and the contemplative life remained at this point virtually the same as he had previously envisioned it: the annihilation of the self so as to live in Christ. His understanding would change in the 1960's when he would see contemplation much more on the natural level,[109] but at the time of his ordination and profession he understood it principally in terms of the annihilation or sacrifice of self and the accompanying experience of the life of God within. This meant the radical cleansing and redirection of his intellect, memory, and will – a cleansing and redirection he viewed as intimately bound up with his vow of obedience. It was through obedience that the false self, the "old man" could be annihilated so the new Man, Christ, could live through him. On March 11, 1947, one week before his solemn profession, he was praying over the formula for the vow of obedience he was to take. It hit him quite forcefully that he would be vowing obedience not only to the present abbot, but to all his successors as well. He wrote, "When I said the part about the successors, I thought of the unlimited

---

[108] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 41-42.

[109] Cf. Merton's 1965 essay "The Place of Obedience" In Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998). In this essay Merton argues that the model for monastic life should shift from one of sacrifice and obedience to the will of God as expressed through one's superiors to one of faith in which the superior and the entire monastery exist to facilitate the monk's personal growth and discovery.

possibilities that phrase might mean – I don't mean specific persons in this community, but just in general!"[110] It was one thing vowing obedience to a man whom you respected and toward whom you felt a natural warmth, but whom might the next abbot be? What would that mean in terms of obedience? He continued:

> Anyway, my intention is to give myself entirely and without compromise to whatever work God wants to do in my soul, but that work is nevertheless in a certain sense already defined by a *contemplative* vocation. By that it seems to me that God has signified a certain path, a certain goal, and I am to keep that in view: that is where obedience must tend according to God's signified will. That means total renunciation of the business, ambitions, honors, activities of the world – a bare minimum of concern with temporal necessities . . . However, no matter what a legitimate superior might command me, I have promised to do. So, to a certain extent, that involves the sacrifice even of contemplation. But it seems to me this has a limit, namely sacrifice of contemplation *for a time*, under certain circumstances, but never the sacrifice of *a whole contemplative vocation as such* unless God makes it inevitable by sheer force – and even in persecution I will be all the more bound to seek solitude and recollection.[111]

Already, and perhaps unconsciously, Merton appears to be building a defense against a future adversary in the form of an abbot whose vision of the monastic life varies from his own, one in which contemplation is not the foremost concern. He appears far more concerned about contemplation than about the love of God. The two concerns are certainly not opposed; however, they can be.

There appears to be a consistent inconsistency in his dilemma that he is unable, or unwilling, to recognize; time and again he emphasizes the Cistercian vocation as a contemplative vocation, yet he recognizes the ultimate end of the monastic life, and

---

[110] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 44.

[111] Ibid., 44.

Christian life in general, to be the annihilation of the self so as to live solely for the love of God. Contemplation *can be* the fruit of loving God, but it is not necessary for one to love God. It remains, always, a gift. There have been many saints whose lives were completely surrendered to the love of God, but who never, or rarely, experienced the grace of contemplation in the way he envisions it at this point in his life.

Just days before his solemn profession Merton renews his commitment to strive to live out the *Cautions* and *Maxims* of St. John of the Cross,[112] and St. John of the Cross, as well as the entire Catholic mystical tradition, understood contemplation as an unmerited supernatural grace, a vision, albeit dark and obscure, of God as He is. This vision or intellectual apprehension of God is not to be confused with love for God. Contemplation normally results from the exercise of the theological virtue of faith insofar as all limited intellectual apprehensions of God arising from natural reason are annihilated and one is left with no natural understanding of God. A *vision* of God may then be "infused" into the person if God chooses, but it is not a natural result. The person may remain in such a state of darkness and emptiness for years or even an entire life time without enjoying the infused contemplation.

Moreover, even if the person does begin to enjoy contemplation, it too remains dark and incomprehensible since this vision of God has no reference in experience, being the vision of what is totally and ontologically other – God. This is precisely why it is an experience of faith; it is the intellectual apprehension of what is unknown and naturally unknowable. It does not in itself involve the will, but the intellect.

[112] Ibid., 46.

Love of God arises from the exercise of the theological virtue of charity in which the human will unites itself with the will of God, chooses and directs its activity to the acquisition of God.

It is the theological virtue of hope that, in a sense, causes and directs the cleansing of the intellect and will insofar as it identifies the end, the teleology of the human person, to that which is beyond all natural reason and desire - God. As the intellect is cleansed of "idols," that is, any apprehension or concept of God derived from natural reason, a great void begins to develop in one's understanding of God. This is the "darkness" of contemplation that necessitates the virtue of faith. Hope is the *assent* of the intellect to the reality that no created being nor even all creation as a whole can serve as its end. Hope is the assent of the intellect to God as the end and purpose of its existence. It remains always hope for "what is unseen," the *other* – God. At the time of his solemn profession of vows Merton continued to view the contemplative life in this manner that is essentially personal, directed toward the conversion of the intellect, the memory, and the will.

Two years later at the time of his ordination Merton continued to struggle with the idea of obedience and the annihilation of self. On May 1, 1949, less than four weeks before his ordination to the priesthood he writes about the trials undergone by various saints who were misunderstood by their contemporaries, and he predicts his lot may very well be the same. He writes in reference to obedience:

> Sooner or later some such trial will probably land on me. It is always more than a passive potency: definitely active. How will I ever be able to take it? And yet I have got to, if it comes. Every day I get some idea of what is in myself when I have to swallow my own ideas about chant, the interior life, solitude, the

> Cistercian vocation, etc., etc. Every day I kill Isaac – my beautiful dream about a silent, solitary, well ordered life of perfect contemplation and perfect monastic observance, with no intrusion from the world, no publicity, no best-selling books, just God and that nice archaic little Carthusian cell!! And I have to make that blind act of faith that God and Our Lady are drawing me – *per crucem* – to something better which I will probably never see this side of heaven.[113]

At this point in his monastic life he continues to hold to the *Cautions* of St. John of the Cross, challenging himself to greater interior silence and focusing his life on God alone. On May 24th, 1949 – two days before his ordination to the priesthood he writes, "Also: in my prayer and all my interior life, such as it is, I am concerned with the need for a greater and more complete interior silence: an interior secrecy that amounts to not even thinking about myself. Silence about my prayer, about the development of my interior life, is becoming an absolute necessity, so that I am beginning to believe I should stop writing about contemplation altogether except perhaps in the most general terms."[114] The theme continues of needing more silence and solitude, or quieting his mind and focusing his desire on God. Nonetheless, his life continues to betray this concern as he never ceases to scale back his writing, to curb his curiosity, to engage in correspondence.

The editor of Merton's journal, Jonathan Montaldo, includes a note for Merton's entry on June 27, 1949. The previous day Merton had been given a quite unexpected privilege by his abbot. The note reads, "Merton discloses a quiet and important turning point for his vocation at Gethsemani, at least in these journals, when Dom James gives Merton permission to leave the enclosure and walk deep into the woods alone for the first time. The expansiveness and depth of Merton's prose, as he recalls his walk, marks June

[113] Ibid., 307.

[114] Ibid., 315.

17, 1949, as a day on which Merton's life at Gethsemani breaks out beyond a past mental and physical confinement."[115] Merton's experience of walking the woods that day also inspired in him the first thoughts of starting a hermitage on the monastery grounds, although he reckons the chances of that happening scant.

Nevertheless, Merton is aware that the permission he received from his abbot was originally suggested by the Abbot General of the Cistercian order. Both the Abbot General, Dom Dominique, and Merton's own abbot, Dom James Fox, were obviously concerned about the possibility of Merton leaving the Cistercians for the more secluded and contemplative Carthusians.[116] It was hoped that giving Merton the opportunity for privacy while writing by allowing him to work alone in the manuscript vault and allowing him time to find solitude in the surrounding woods would curb his often-expressed interest in a more contemplative order. The new permission, however, while a source of great comfort to Merton, did not squelch the paradoxical desires he held for both more solitude and greater engagement with his many distracting interests.

In the next few years following Merton's ordination to the priesthood his increasing desire for solitude was accompanied by a simultaneous increase in interests at variance to the fostering of interior quiet and solitude. Merton's influence and role within the monastic community developed as he took on more influential offices becoming Master of Scholastics in 1951 and Master of Novices in 1955 – two very critical roles in the formation of the young monks.

---

[115] Ibid., 328.

[116] Ibid., 331-332.

In addition to these sensitive and demanding positions he continued to write as much as ever, expanded his field of correspondence with those outside the monastery and began to experience more acutely and to lament the changing atmosphere of the monastic environment. In July of 1949 he wrote, "I realized that I have been awfully busy and my mind is terribly active . . . it seems to me that, since I became a great success in the book business, I have been becoming more and more of a failure in my vocation . . . Activity is already so strong in my nature, and it is piled on me by the circumstances of this abbey, but beyond that, my mind goes on rushing into business, carried away by the sheer power of its own momentum."[117] Yet, the following month (August, 1949) there is a change in Merton's attitude regarding activity.

Previously he is generally unwilling to admit the likelihood that activity is good for the contemplative, but here he makes the first positive evaluation of activity stating, "I am becoming more and more inclined to feel there is, in fact, no real opposition between contemplation and activity *when they are properly ordered*."[118] Again, we see Merton's propensity to equivocation. He is always riding the fence and refuses to make a commitment one way or another. That there is no inherent opposition between writing and contemplation is a well-known fact. That is not the question, however. What Merton needs to be concerned with is not an abstract dilemma, but his own situation. Is there an inherent opposition between writing and contemplation *in Thomas Merton!* By September he arrives at the amazing thought (amazing considering the previously

[117] Ibid., 341-342.

[118] Ibid., 347.

negative evaluation he consistently held regarding the effect of writing on his vocation) that writing could be his path to sanctity:

> To be as good a monk as I can, and to remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no issue: this is very hard, because I am all mixed up in illusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down. But without exaggeration, repetition, useless emphasis. No need for breast-beating and lamentation before the eyes of anyone but You, O God, who see the depths of my fatuity. To be frank without being boring. It is a kind of crucifixion. Not a very dramatic or painful one. But it requires so much honesty that it is beyond my nature. It must come somehow from the Holy Ghost.
>
> One of the results of all this could well be a complete and holy transparency: living, praying, and writing in the light of the Holy Spirit, losing myself entirely by becoming public property just as Jesus is public property in the Mass. Perhaps this is an important aspect of my priesthood – my living of my Mass: to become as plain as a Host in the hands of everybody. Perhaps it is this, after all, that is to be my way of solitude. One of the strangest ways so far devised, but it is the way of the Word of God.
>
> Yet, after all, this only teaches me that nothing vital about myself can ever be public property![119]

This shift in attitude toward writing and activity is significant as it signals a fundamental change in his approach to contemplation and the nature of his vocation. For Merton, the quieting of the imagination, intellect and will had been the pathway to contemplation and he had seen the monastic vocation as an environment to foster this process. The general activity of the monastery as well as the necessity he felt to write, whether it be under obedience or to satisfy his own desire for accomplishment, he consistently believed and complained were major factors, and in the case of writing the primary factor, that undermined his spiritual progress.

[119] Ibid., 365-366.

From this point on Merton began to gradually accept writing, correspondence and visitors as key to his vocation. Paradoxically, he never surrenders the desire and pursuit of solitude.

In the next chapter, we will examine the second half of Merton's monastic journey. We will see how activity, associations with others and concern for social issues as well as other religious traditions become increasing present in his life. We will also see how his desire for solitude is interpreted in actuality once it becomes available to him. These factors taken together point not to a well-balanced contemplative sharing the wealth of his wisdom, but rather to an individual who was desperately evading the demands of the very life he believed himself called to live and share. It was within this context that Merton's awareness of Eastern religions truly developed and in which his engagement with D. T. Suzuki began. Merton's interest and introduction to Zen occurred simultaneously with a radical change in his approach to contemplation.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Monastic Journey Part II

The Professed Monk 1949-1968

In the previous chapter, we saw how the primary tension in Merton's early monastic life was between activity and contemplation. Merton viewed the excessive activity of the monastery in general as well as his own elected and unnecessary activities as fundamentally at odds with the contemplative life and with his own contemplative journey in particular. After his ordination, however, he appears to relent in his estimation of writing as detrimental to his vocation and signals a new approach; he would embrace writing itself as a path to solitude and self-discovery. Yet the conflict between the activity engendered by writing and his desire for silence and solitude was not resolved. This tension continued until the mid-1950's when it appears to have come to a head.

Despite having resolved at the time of his ordination to the priesthood to leave poetry behind, we find that only a year later he was corresponding with Sister Therese Lentfoehr and others regarding his poetry.[120] In 1950, Merton was also corresponding about Eastern philosophies with his publisher James Laughlin who seems to have sparked a renewal of Merton's interest in this area, although, now with a more positive and open light. Not long before a Chinese bishop had given a talk at Gethsemane about the challenges the Catholic Church was facing in China. He had mentioned how there were tens of thousands of Buddhist monks in China and this fact impressed Merton and may

[120] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 264.

have caused him to reevaluate the "wisdom from the East."[121] His subsequent remarks regarding Eastern thought do not carry the dismissive attitude of his earlier references and by the mid 1950's he is regularly referencing his interest in Zen.

In his published journals there are no entries from March 10, 1953 through July 17, 1956.[122] Just prior to this period of silence Merton's journal entries express a great increase in tension regarding his desire for solitude, even to the point of seriously considering leaving the monastery. He had been meeting with Dr. Law, a psychiatrist who encouraged him to leave the monastery even if he had to start his own.[123] Other sympathetic monks at Gethsemani also encouraged him to leave.[124] For some time he had been corresponding with Carthusian and Camaldolese monks enquiring about the possibility of joining their orders and received mixed replies. In October of 1952 he seems convinced that Gethsemani offered the opportunity to do what he claimed he wanted to do – give himself completely to God, "The only desire that counts is to give yourself completely to God with Christ on the cross, in the renunciation of all human desire and aspirations, in order to live for God alone in sacrifice. It is to me quite clear that, if I stay at Gethsemani, all that St. John of the Cross demands for the purification of

---

[121] Ibid., 264.

[122] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 3, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, 1952-1960* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), xiii. The introduction to his journal for these years remarks that "Merton kept rather brief journals in the last months of 1952 and in 1953, with a hiatus in 1954-1955. It was in this period that Merton gave up his position as master of scholastics, training the young monks in preparation for final vows (he was appointed to that position in 1951) to become, in 1955, master of novices. In 1956 he again began keeping his journal on a regular basis.".

[123] Ibid., 17.

[124] Ibid., 17-18.

a soul can *easily* be fulfilled. The cross is here."[125] When he received permission from his abbot in January of 1953 to spend significant periods of time at a location on the monastery grounds he calls "St. Anne's" he writes, "St. Anne's is like a rampart between two existences. On one side I know the community to which I must return. And I *can* return to it with love. But to return seems like a waste. It is a waste I offer to God. On the other side is the great wilderness of silence in which, perhaps, I might never speak to anyone but God again, as long as I live."[126] In 1955 Merton began his new office of Novice Master, which occupied much of his time and energy. It was also during this period of silence in his journals that Merton underwent a series of emotional crises[127] after which he appears to accept and embrace his insatiable appetite for writing,[128] his desire to communicate with people outside the monastery, and interest in religious traditions he formerly considered incompatible with his own vocation.

In this chapter, we will review how Merton's attitude changed toward these very things which in his early years he claimed hindered his monastic vocation, how he eventually came to accept and embrace them rather than continue to struggle on the contemplative path he formerly followed. Central to understanding this profound change will be an examination of a mental crises Merton underwent during the 1950's. We will

---

[125] Ibid., 20.

[126] Ibid., 30.

[127] Ibid., 276. Merton noted concerning the end of 1952, "Since my retreat I have been having another one of those nervous breakdowns. The same old familiar business. I am getting used to it now – since the old days in 1936 when I thought I was going to crack up on the Long Island Rail-road and the more recent one since ordination. And now this." In 1955 and again in 1956 he experienced further serious crises.

[128] Ibid., xiv. "Not counting pamphlets, essays, and reviews, Merton published ten books between 1952 and 1960."

then examine how his embrace of these interests engendered a quest to redefine his understanding of monasticism and the role of contemplation in the world.

This was not merely an intellectual interest in which Merton was engaged, but these ideas were reflected in the manner in which he lived. He began to carry on an enormous amount of correspondence about anything that interested him, to eventually receive numerous guests and public figures who had no ties to the monastic life or the field of contemplation, to make frequent visits to Louisville and other local towns for specious reasons,[129] to visit the homes of local residence whom he had befriended, to initiate an affair with a nurse under whose care he was while in the hospital, and finally to leave the monastery on an extended Eastern journey with no defined goal or conclusion.

Underscoring these activities, many of which occurred without the permission or in direct contradiction to the rule of his order and the directives of his abbot, was an attempt to redefine or reinterpret his vow of obedience which in his early years as monk served as the anchor and guide to his activities. His compulsion to engage in ever more activity generated a need to discover a way to do so that would satisfy his conscience.

---

[129] Merton's journal entry for July 4, 1960 for instance reads, "What business have I to be sitting around in Jim Wygal's house in Anchorage, listening to records, trying to talk about something? I don't belong in that any more, still less in the place where I went with Fr. John Loftus and his friend, the other night to hear some Jazz. At least I have found out by experience that this just does not go. I am dead to it; it is finished long ago. You don't drag a corpse down to 4th street and set it up in a chair, at a table, and in polite society." See Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 18. Apparently, Merton did learn how to drag a corpse around as this was not the last time he engaged in such activity. In fact, it became increasingly more common as the years went on. Mott writes, "Merton's friends had learned to arrive [at the "hermitage"] with a good deal of loose change in their pockets, a case of beer, and a bottle of bourbon." Even in June of 1966, in the midst of his affair with "M," whom he claimed to love ardently, he snuck away and went swimming at the monastery lake with another woman. Merton commented he nearly drowned for having been so drunk. See Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 446.

His evolving understanding of monasticism, therefore, involved a new concept of and much broader attitude toward obedience, one that allowed him to justify his activities that were clearly at odds with the rule of the Cistercian Order and directives of his abbot. This change of attitude can be seen in remarks he wrote in February of 1966 where he compares his treatment by his abbot to a form of execution:

> No question that certain policies of my Abbot in my regard amount to an execution and a putting to death of myself as a public figure and as any kind of influence in the Order by personal presence and contact. (i.e. I am sure there will never be any question of my being one of the *peritit* [experts] to be summoned to help G[eneral] Chapters or Abbots' Committee meetings in Europe or even America. I know I am wanted by some others and Dom J. will never permit it.) This is precisely what I must accept. Not that I really want to go, and if it were up to me, I would probably refuse anyway. If I thought I *could*. But this business of simply *having no choice* . . . not even being spoken to (as he did not even discuss the question of the meeting of the editorial board of the *Collectanea*). The question of being put to death morally is real. I see aspects of his motives which he probably does not see. I do not agree with a sado-masochistic spirituality. I think he is simply *wrong* and even in some sense perverse. Yet I have to accept all this without evasion and without retaliation. Only the Grace of Christ can help me![130]

What perplexed me when I first began to read comments such as this in Merton's journals and letters is that the entire subject is incomprehensible given the context of his life. In this case, he had been asking, literally for two decades, to be left alone, to be forgotten and obscure, to spend all his time in contemplation, and here he is in his hermitage engaging in massive self-pity because no one is paying attention to him! This is in 1966 when so many Merton scholars proclaim he is well on his way to being the "fully integrated man," but the depth of the contradiction apparent between what Merton claims

[130] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, 1966-1967* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 364.

he wants and what he in fact rejects is incomprehensible. If it were simply a matter of him not living what he intends to live, that would be one thing. Many individuals strive for things that take their entire lifetime to achieve. The pathology involved here, however, is that not only does Merton fail to live what he portrays himself to the world to believe, he engages in incessant justification of his behavior. He seems to have no clue as to who he is or what he stands for or to where he is heading. He is berating his abbot for complying with that for which he himself asked, in fact demanded – to leave him in solitude. For years Merton had been distancing himself further and further from the monastic community and the order. As early as 1952 he had expressed to Dom Fox that he hated Gethsemani, a sentiment he repeated often over the years, he did not agree with the Trappist form of monasticism, especially as it was realized at Gethsemani, he considered his abbot not much better than a prison warden, and yet he expects his abbot to invite him to council meetings, to serve as an expert in the affairs of the order? Was his new attitude toward monasticism and worldly interests a maturation of his character and thought or an exercise in justifying his evasion from the demands upon one seeking to die to self and live for God alone?

The Old and New Merton

There is relatively little written about the "early" Thomas Merton, that is, his life during the first ten years of his monastic experience. The reasons for this are simple; other than with his publishers and monks from other monasteries, Merton had very little engagement with those outside his cloister and restricted his communications to those who shared an interest in the very narrow field of monastic life. The most obvious

reason, however, is that his writings during this period contained little controversy other than the fact that a rather worldly individual had chosen to leave the world behind and live out the remainder of his life behind cloister walls. As far as social teaching, his writings had not yet veered into this arena to any significant extent. His books and articles dealt almost exclusively with the monastic life and contemplation. In this regard, there was nothing innovative in what he wrote. He presented in a quite orthodox manner the general framework of the Catholic mystical tradition. What was new was the audience to which he was writing.

Merton had found a spiritual niche that was largely left unexploited – modern man. Virtually all Catholic mystical and spiritual literature had been written in the context of the world view espoused by Christendom. Even the Church Fathers, and later individuals such as Sts. Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux, while often engaging in apologetics, wrote nevertheless to an audience that shared their fundamental ideas, an audience that believed in God, similar moral and political structures, and did not question the premise that life was meaningful precisely because it had a teleology, a purpose arising from a theistic worldview. This framework in which spiritual theology developed continued even through the Protestant break with Catholicism and the Enlightenment. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed a fundamental shift in the academic worldview away from theism to dialectical materialism and atheism, with its accompanying crisis of meaning that eventually generated the modern existential movement.

By the mid twentieth century many individuals routinely called into question the most fundamental premises of Catholic thought and there was little written on the popular

level to address this situation. Merton's autobiography which chronicled the intellectual and spiritual development of a man sharing the very experience of the masses lost in a vacuum of doubt, skepticism and futility, was somewhat of a pioneering event in making Catholic spirituality comprehensible and accessible to the modern world. Nevertheless, as long as Merton stuck with the topic of contemplation, writing to an audience interested in contemplation, he was fulfilling the task first placed upon him by Dom Frederic Dunne during his first month in the monastery.[131] The interest surrounding Merton is primarily located in the period following his ordination when his interests take a profound turn.

This dramatic turn in Merton's interests, while clearly beginning shortly after his ordination, appears to have matured during a period when he took leave of his journal. Having decided in 1949 to use journaling as a path to solitude and self-discovery he soon abandons this path for over three years, resuming his journaling only in July of 1956. During this period, however, Merton underwent some of the most profound trials of his monastic life. The fact that he chose not to record them in his journal is odd since he had decided to "remain myself, and to write about it: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity, masking nothing, confusing no

[131] Abbot Dunne recognized almost immediately Merton's proclivity for writing and encouraged it from the beginning. The question as to whether or not Merton was under obedience to write leads one into murky water. As a general rule, one can say that when Merton felt he shouldn't be writing, but was looking for an excuse to do so anyway, he complained he was under obedience to write. Yet, it is clear from both his own journal writing as well as letters and testimony by Dom Fox and other monks at Gethsemani that while Merton was certainly encouraged to write in the early years, he was never under the obligation of strict obedience to do so, especially if he determined together with his spiritual director that it was detrimental to his spiritual life. Once Dom Fox was elected abbot Merton had no obligation to write whatsoever, although he continued to portray himself to others as being under that obligation. Once it was clear he could no longer use the excuse of "obedience" in order to justify his writing, he then decided it was a matter of moral conscience, that he had an obligation before justice to write.

issue: this is very hard, because I am all mixed up in illusions and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down." It may be that he was simply overwhelmed with his new duties, yet Merton's official work load had always been heavy, not to mention the unnecessary activity he always engaged in. Merton scholar, Donald Grayston offers another explanation.

Grayston has written on this period of Merton's life in a book titled *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*. The "Noonday Demon" is a reference to an affliction not uncommon among monastics called *acedia* during which the monk experiences various degrees of restlessness, doubt, and a general lack of enthusiasm for any spiritual practice. Grayston uses Merton's correspondence with members of the Camaldolese Order in Italy as a stage to unfold the drama of Merton's inner struggle during the ten years following his priestly ordination to around 1960. He divides this timeframe into three distinct periods: the first, Grayston calls the "preliminary acedia" and covers the years from 1949 to 1952; the second period or "greater acedia" is the pivotal period from 1952 to 1956 – the period corresponding to time when there are no entries in Merton's journal; and the third period he terms the "lesser acedia" following the previous period until the year 1960.[132]

According to Grayston the *preliminary acedia* of Merton was "critical for Merton's spiritual and theological development, a time after which his perspectives expanded from the narrow focus on life in the monastery that had marked the years since his arrival there in 1941." During the *greater acedia* Merton no longer merely talks about leaving Gethsemani, but makes an actual attempt to do so by applying for a

[132] Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 8.

transitus or canonical transfer from one monastic order to another, in this case, from the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance to the Order of Camaldolese. The *lesser acedia* covers the subsequent period when, his attempts to join the Camaldolese having failed, he explores the possibility of moving to some remote area or joining an "experimental" Benedictine monastery in Mexico.

Grayston's treatment of this crucial period in Merton's life is valuable and accurate in that it reveals the tendency of Merton to evade and escape. However, as is typical of most Merton scholars, Grayston interprets Merton's condition as one of expanding consciousness and spiritual progress. Since this is such a critical period in Merton's life it will be useful to assess Grayston's evaluation of the period. I will examine Grayston's ideas regarding Merton's experience of acedia in another chapter, however, here I would just like to note that Grayston's belief that Merton's acedia ended at the end of the 1950's is unfounded and that it not only continued, but intensified to the end of his life. Part of this intensification being his increasing interest in anything outside the monastery, including Zen.

As was shown in the last chapter, Merton's interest in a more contemplative order began before he was a fully professed monk, perhaps even as early as his days as a novice. This concern about moving to a completely contemplative monastery continued and deepened, becoming even obsessive in the 1950's, so much so, that in July of 1956 Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, arranged for Merton to attend a psychiatric workshop in Minnesota. The workshop was for priests and monks and others involved in the formation of religious. It was the first-time Merton had left the monastery since arriving in 1941 and he was highly excited because his interest in psychiatry and psychoanalysis

had been increasing since the early 1950's and particularly since he had assumed the office of Master of Novices in 1955. Merton believed psychiatry was essential in dealing with the many postulants and novices at Gethsemane and wanted some practical tips as to how this could be accomplished.[133] He had even delved into psychiatry himself writing an article titled *Neurosis in the Monastic Life*.[134] This bent toward psychiatry was part of Merton's evolving attitude toward things exterior to the monastery and monastic life per se. He was eager to reap the benefits of the workshop for himself as well as for his novices.

Merton did not realize, however, that part of the reason Dom Fox had arranged for Merton to attend the workshop was so he could meet, and be evaluated by, a prominent psychiatrist named Dr. Gregory Zilboorg. This meeting with Zilboorg is often related as perhaps the most traumatic experience in Merton's life as a monk. Merton's desire for greater solitude and silence had been mounting for a number of years and became obsessive from 1952 to 1955 when he frantically attempted to arrange a *transitus* to a Camaldolese hermitage in Europe. His attempt having failed, he continued to nevertheless to be preoccupied with the eremitical life. It was this subject upon which Zilboorg zoomed in and confronted Merton. While Zilboorg's method of confrontation is criticized by some as unprofessional, he was in my opinion dead on in analyzing Merton's state of mind. Merton entered the following in his journal about his meeting with Zilboorg:

---

[133] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. vol. 3, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life, 1952-1960* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 57-58.

[134] Ibid. Apparently taking Dr. Zilboorg's advice, Merton never had the article published. It was, however, published posthumously in 1991, not as a contribution to psychiatry or spiritual direction, but to Merton studies in general in the *Merton Annual IV*.

This morning before mass I talked an hour and a half with Zilboorg about my own troubles and a lot of things came out.
1.-It turns out *he* was the one who engineered my coming here – through Abbot Baldwin – partly because of the danger of the article being published and partly because he had sensed my own difficulties.
2.-It turns out also – as I know – that I am in somewhat bad shape and that I am neurotic – and that the difficulties handling it right is very considerable. He has his own ideas about that - God alone knows if they are feasible.
3.-Great extent of my dependence on vows – I would hardly have imagined I used them in the way he said – but anyway, I can get some details on it. As substitutes for reality?
4.-"You are a gadfly to your superiors."

"Very stubborn – you keep coming back until you get what you want."

"You are afraid to be an ordinary monk in the community."

You and Father Eudes can very easily become a pair of semi-psychotic quacks."

"Talking to Dr. Rome (about Zen) you thought only of yourself using him as a source of information and self-aggrandizement. You thought nothing at all of your priesthood, the apostolate, the church, his soul."
"You like to be famous, you want to be a big shot, you keep pushing your way out – to publicity – Megalomania and narcissism are your big trends."
Things which I know and did not Know. And I suppose that is just the trouble. I am quite capable of saying, "I am a narcissist" and yet it changes nothing and it has not helped me to understand.
While he said all this I thought "How much he looks like Stalin" but in reality I am tremendously relieved and grateful – and when I sung mass with the monks I was praying hard to know what to do about it.

Other things he said:

"Your hermit trend is pathological." "You are a promotor. If you were not in a monastery you are the type that would clean up on Wall Street one day and lose it all on the horses the next." (I thought – there must be a lot of Pop in me yet – Was it Pop that said "Don't think! Act on hunches"?)
When I asked what I had said wrong to Dr. Rome he said "You didn't say it. You conveyed it."
Then again he said: "These are not things you can foresee. They are traps you fall into as you go along and you don't realize it until you are hurt."
. . .
Another thing he said – "It is not intelligence you lack, but affectivity" – meaning it is there but I have never let it get out – so that when the situation calls for it I either intellectualize – verbalize – or else go into a depression.
Again – "It will do you no good to be forbidden to write – you need some silence and isolation, but it needs to be prohibited in your heart – if it is merely forbidden, it will not seem prohibited to you – Yet your writing is now becoming

verbological – but your words must be incarnate."[135]

At the time, Merton's friends, as well as a local psychiatrist friend, were encouraging him to leave the monastery and pursue his "dream" of becoming a solitary. These same individuals tend to criticize Merton's abbot, Dom Fox, as too controlling and the entire monastic model of obedience as antiquated and obsolete. Yet, today many Merton scholars acknowledge that Dom Fox knew Merton better than anyone, including his friends, and if it were not for Dom Fox's strength of character and insight regarding Merton's character, he would most likely have encountered enormous chaos in his life and perhaps have lost his vocation completely. Even Merton, despite his frequent and consistent complaints toward Dom Fox, admitted the need for his balancing influence.

In his official biography, Mott plays down Merton's erratic behavior saying, "Had Thomas Merton been as neurotic, quixotic, and generally unpredictable as he has been portrayed at times, no one as shrewd as Dom James would have entrusted him with the post of either master of scholastics or master of novices. Nor, for that matter, would the abbot have chosen Father Louis as his confessor."[136] But Mott appears to miss the distinction between Merton's intellectual understanding of monasticism and his ability to live it out. It is apparently true that Merton communicated very effectively about the spiritual life both in writing and in speech and Dom James recognized his talent for this and the benefit he could bring about as master of scholastics and master of novices. That is not what Dom James was concerned about, but rather Merton's own spiritual and

[135] Ibid., 59-60.

[136] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 278.

personal immaturity that led him to avoid, not responsibilities toward the monastery, but toward his own spiritual life.

This is true not only in terms of refusing to grant Merton permission to go on trips or receive visitors or write on certain topics, but it was Fox's prudence that kept Merton from making what most people now acknowledge would have been a fatal transition – that of joining the Camaldolese Order. Of all those giving Merton counsel during this period between 1952 and 1955 only Dom Fox appears to have kept his objectivity and assess correctly what Merton was experiencing. Merton believed Dom Fox was interested only in using him to preserve the good name of Gethsemane and to prevent scandal. In a letter to Dom James written in 1954 he says, "I am beginning to face some facts about myself . . . something very deep and very fundamental in myself. A fault that has been basic for the last twelve years – all my life. Continual, uninterrupted resentment. I resent and even hate Gethsemani. I fight against the place constantly."[137] However, we know from numerous letters and other testimony, Dom Fox was, first of all, concerned with Merton's own spiritual welfare and all the decisions he made regarding Merton were made in view of this concern. Consider Dom James' words to Dom Gabriel Sortais, the general of the Trappist order:

> Father Louis knows that his troubles do not come from his Trappist surroundings in general, and Gethsemani in particular. He knows, because he practically admitted it to me, that his problems are all inside himself. But as neurotics usually do, they blame everybody and everything else for their interior sufferings. His problem is that he would like to be without any restraint or discipline over

[137] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 206-207.

him, so that he could always do what he wished. But if he were in such a position where would his spiritual life be?[138]

Yet Merton was so intent on achieving his will that it led him to oppose his abbot in just about every facet of their life at Gethsemani. The following is an entry from Merton's journal dated July 30, 1959:

> Yesterday in Chapter, with what seemed to me to be a feeling that he had definitely scored, Rev. Fr. Announced the death of a priest of Our Lady of the H. Ghost who was out of the monastery on an exclaustration and who fell into the grand canyon. He was their sculptor and *one of the many* problem children (a few weeks ago he spoke of their 4th. apostasy). Had been out in a diocese in Guatemala and had not done well there. It seemed to me that Rev. Father, piling on all the drama he could muster, was making a very "good thing" out of it. It was almost as if he smacked his lips when he declared that this was "the judgment of God on one who had not kept his vows."
>
> Perhaps I am not charitable but I feel that the self-righteousness of the Order towards these poor people is something terrible.
>
> Here is the question I cannot help asking.
>
> What is the matter with that monastery? . . .
>
> Fr. A. – apostate, on a pseudo-mystical apocalyptic "mission"?
>
> The other pseudo-mystics in the monastery. The plain neurotics. The façade of optimism. The "act" they all put on – the elaborate demonstration of feeling.
>
> The worst problem Rev. Fr. has had, here and there, have been with the people he liked best. Why? Is there something pernicious about his affection? It certainly repels most people. And it is terribly ambiguous. He is one of the most neatly compartmentalized minds I know of. To your face, gushing with affection. In another context, behind your back, laughing at your idiosyncrasies with some other officer. In public, demonstrating a great interest in your work. In private, despising it completely. All enthusiasm for the Choir and chant and liturgy and crazy to make records, yet he'll tell you that in choir the thing to do is to "abstract from all that." A most possessive and power-loving abbot, yet once wanted to be a hermit. I wonder if he knows which one of all these men is real? I suppose "he" is really the "Abbot," the real self is the one that confronts guests or new postulants and exudes charm all over the place. That is what he most works at, perhaps, except for the sentimental prima donna that he is in choir, eyes closed, head thrown back, in a luxury of mental suffering.

[138] Ibid., 184.

> The thing is that this man is, in a way, very great and yet very small, very astute in some details and yet incompetent in the most essential things – his dealings with the community and with souls. (In this I would be far worse than he – and not so good at the business!)[139]

It is difficult to understand how Merton could consider his abbot in such a light when no other opinions of Dom Fox, that I have read, portray him in this manner.

Returning to the ordeal with Dr. Zilboorg; following his private meeting with Zilboorg, Merton and Zilboorg were joined the next day by Dom James to discuss the results of their session. Neither Merton or Fox was prepared for what occurred. Mott remarks regarding the effect of the meeting upon Merton: "These were the most damaging ten minutes since he had left the world for the monastery."[140] Mott even implies that the meeting was so traumatic Merton could not bring himself to reflect upon it even in his journal that records the first meeting in detail, but omits even a mention of the second. During the meeting Zilboorg tells Merton, "You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'Hermit'."[141] Reminiscent of his observations of the meeting on the previous day Merton just sat crying and muttering, "Stalin! Stalin!"

Nevertheless, Merton apparently acknowledged the credibility of Zilboorg's observations regarding his character, but realized as well the two could not have worked together. Zilboorg visited Gethsemani a few months later and met again with Merton. After the meeting Merton wrote to his publisher Naomi Burton saying, "it transpires that though I am indeed crazy as a loon I don't really need analysis." Merton credited

---

[139] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 312-313.

[140] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 297.

[141] Ibid., 297.

Zilboorg for realizing that while Merton certainly had issues to work out he was not the person to facilitate the process. Yet the fact remains that the Judgement of Dom James and Dr. Zilboorg stands in great contrast to the popular view of Merton as the tranquil mystic, even to the portrayal of him as a "seeker of truth" and one evolving toward wholeness. What this crisis of 1955 reveals is that Merton was off course and drifting aimlessly, attracted by numerous distractions from his explicit goal, a condition from which he never appears to have recovered. He wrote in 1958, "Whatever problems I have are on the level where Zen can hit them squarely. They are matters of psychology and disorganized living – wrong attitudes, 'conflicts' more than an [sic] anything else. And because of them I have been failing to face the issue - have been getting away from the big job of my life, the fighting out of the inner battle for freedom, and losing myself in exterior plans – and in useless writing. Mind cluttered with lumber and dust."[142] It is doubtful, considering the volume of writing he was doing at this time as well as the amount of correspondence he was conducting in addition to his duties as master of novices, that Merton was actually engaging in the practice of Zen at this time in any meaningful way. Although he did not at this time consider himself an authority on Zen he had already begun reading Suzuki and other works on Zen. In any case his behavior did not change, and his mind continued to be "cluttered with lumber and dust."

Throughout the 1950's the prevailing distraction for Merton was his recurring obsession with relocating to another monastery or another, more contemplative order. Following his failed attempt at joining the Camaldolese and making a firm resolution to put relocating from his mind, he nevertheless initiates and conducts during the late 1950's

[142] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 224.

an intensive exploration of the possibility of joining an order in Central or South American, or possibly the North American desert or Alaska. This, despite having been offered the opportunity in 1955 to enter upon the eremitical life completely at Gethsemane – an opportunity at which he ironically balked, having gone to extreme measures in the previous several years to obtain such an opportunity!

This new effort at evasion appears to have been sparked by a friendship he developed with a novice from Nicaragua named Ernesto Cardenal who eventually played important roles in Nicaraguan political affairs and is widely recognized now as Latin America's most important poet.[143] Through his left-leaning novice, Merton became acquainted with many influential figures in Latin America with whom he began continuous correspondence about poetry and politics. Malgorzata Poks' book[144] on Merton's correspondence with Latin American figures paints Merton as one extremely concerned with the plight of the people and tyranny of political oppressors and whose maturing vision was reaching out beyond the walls of the monastery to all humanity. Yet, one wonders how deep this concern actually was beyond mere academic interest and whether it was a reaching out to the poor or an escape from the "poor men who labor in Gethsemani" he wrote about at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.[145]

---

[143] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 236-237.

[144] See Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Lambert Academic Publishing: 2011).

[145] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 462. Merton writes, imagining God is speaking to him saying, "But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in

Mott remarks that in the late summer of 1951 Merton "went on to question whether his writing honored God, or whether it was simply a celebration of self. He was still wondering this in his journals of the 1960's."[146] There is no doubt Merton's interests were expansive and his writings chartered the concerns of many regarding the various plights of humanity. The question is whether these concerns moved more than his mind and actually reached into his heart to bring about personal change. Mott also remarks that "when visitors to the hermitage tried to chide him into admitting he was not 'a true hermit,' Merton would ask, 'What's your idea of a hermit?' If the question gave him an easy out, it also threw the visitor back on his or her own preconceptions of what a hermit ought to be in order to be a 'real one.'"[147] In making this comment Mott engages in the very elusiveness Merton made into a lifestyle.

Merton's comment in this situation is clearly an attempt to evade appearing to look like a charlatan or a fraud, yet rather than dig into this extremely important and pervasive aspect of Merton's personality and modus operandi, Mott chooses to use the comment as an example of how Merton challenged people to "move beyond their preconceptions." The question asked was very valid and important: "Are you really a hermit?" The answer, of course, is no! But this answer undermines Merton's credibility and so Mott leaves it untouched just as nearly all Merton scholars leave such questions untouched. In a similar way, although he portrayed himself as a "Zen master" Merton's credibility in this area was no more than his credibility as a Christian hermit. Merton

---

Gethsemani: 'That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.'"

[146] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 181.

[147] Ibid., 186.

tends to portray himself in roles that he admires deeply, but with which in reality he has little to do. An early example of Merton "talking loudly," but doing little was his encounter with Catherine de Hueck.

Before entering Gethsemani Merton had the opportunity to work with poor African Americans at a Catholic Action settlement house in Harlem called Friendship House run by the Catholic social worker Catherine de Hueck. She had been encouraging him to spend some time there teaching and helping the kids. In his journals Merton engages in mental struggles trying to decide whether he should go to Harlem and work with the poor or enter Gethsemani. His thoughts lean toward concern for the poor, helping the poor, "really doing something" about their plight, but he doesn't. He goes, rather, to live with the "poor men who labor at Gethsemani."

I think this decision is indicative of Merton's character. He writes about helping the poor, he writes about living in harmony with his brother monks, he writes about obedience, he writes about contemplation, he writes about Zen, but he doesn't actually engage in any of these efforts, or he engages in them only as long as they place no restrictions on his freedom. It is this freedom to constantly evade commitment, divert attention to a distraction, engage in whatever activity he pleases, ignore the directives of his abbot and the rule of his order, that eventually causes enormous cognitive dissonance within his mind as evidenced by his consistent and numerous journal entries in which he admits to the reality of the situation, that he is in large part a fraud, that his concern about so many issues has nothing to do with his contemplative vocation. Unable to set them aside, however, he begins to justify these "extra-monastic" interests as the path of "self-awareness" and continuous growth, something he owes to his brother Christians in order

to be in solidarity with their plight. Grayston quotes from Belcastro's work *Praying the Question* in which Belcastro comments on Merton never being able to identify what kind of monk he was or whether he was a monk at all. Belcastro writes, "While he is never able to say exactly who he is or what kind of monk or hermit he might be, he was none-the-less aware how living the question moved him in the direction of becoming more authentically human, free and alive in relation to and for the sake of the world in which he lived."[148] This is a convenient way to interpret Merton's endless evasions from commitment – "He was always evolving into something greater and more mature." But do the facts bear out this interpretation?

Is Merton actually praying more, becoming humbler, serving his brothers in the monastery with more zeal, judging his neighbors with charity, becoming less selfish? In my view, it would be very difficult to demonstrate this in the affirmative. The records show clearly - his own journals, correspondence from others, and observations of friends and acquaintances – an individual disinterested in those with whom he lives, highly critical and impatient toward anyone who in the least veers from his way of thought, and desiring special privileges because he is bothered by the inconveniences of the life he freely chose. This self-centered and cavalier lifestyle eventually develops into making frequent and secret trips away from the monastery, drinking bouts at the homes of friends, swimming excursions with women at the monastery lake, and other such behavior that reaches somewhat of a climax in his affair with a young nurse during the spring and summer of 1966. His behavior bears out the truth of Dom James concern that Merton was simply not mature enough to handle freedom. The more freedom he

[148] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 205.

received in terms of solitude and work the more erratic his behavior became.[149] Merton sums up his own behavior with this April 28, 1964 entry to his journal:

> One thing is certain. I am *sick*, *nauseated* with the purposelessness and futility and excess of my activity. It is my fault for accepting invitations to do and write things . . . One thing is certain – I am simply surfeited with words and typescript and print, surfeited to the point of utter nausea. Surfeited with letters, too. This is so bad that it amounts to a sickness, like the obsessive gluttony of the rich woman in Theodoret who was eating thirty chickens a day until some hermit cured her. The only hermit that can cure me is myself and so I have to become that solitary in order to qualify as my own physician. But I also see that I am so sick that the cure is going to take time and if by the end of the year it can be well begun I can count myself fortunate . . . I feel like a drunk and incontinent man falling into bed with another whore, in spite of himself. The awful thing is that I *can't* stop.[150]

It is true he wrote very insightful essays and books, but do these writings necessarily give an accurate witness as to the man's personal growth and character? In literature, especially dramas, one does not look to an actor's words to discern the nature of his character, but to his actions. Rather than quote what Merton wrote about one would do much better to observe how he treated those with whom he lived and worked, how faithfully he lived out the rule to which he freely chose to commit himself, if he really

---

[149] Ibid., 184. In a letter to the Father General of the order, Dom Gabriel Sortais, Dom Fox writes, "Father Louis knows that his troubles do not come from his Trappist surroundings in general, and Gethsemani in particular. He knows, because he practically admitted it to me, that his problems are all inside himself. But as neurotics usually do, they blame everybody and everything else for their interior sufferings. His problem is that he would like to be without any restraint or discipline over him, so that he could always do what he wished. But if he were in such a position where would his spiritual life be?"

[150] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5, *Dancing in the Waters of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage, 1963-1965* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 100-101.

spent his time in contemplation or amused himself with endless considerations about social policy and critiques on the lives of others.

Zen aided him in this new path of "self-discovery" because Merton understood Zen to stand in contrast or even opposition to dogmatism, convention, authority, rule and anything that might impede one's curiosity or impulses. Zen allowed one to "be" in the moment without concern as to whether the moment was appropriate for a monk, or a Christian for that matter. At this time in Merton's development when he is desperately seeking to escape his monastic situation he begins to explore Zen more seriously and make the first steps of practicing it in his own life.

Merton's attempts to transfer to a monastery in Latin America being frustrated as were his plans to enter the Camaldolese, his energy and attention are diverted ever more completely to social and political issues. He was already writing some social critique in the late 1950's, but after moving to another monastery finally appeared to be impossible he escaped in correspondence and social activism. Victor Kramer, the editor of the fourth volume of Merton's journals noted in his introduction:

> Pardoxically, precisely when he longed for more solitude and often debated about how much he should continue to publish, he found himself asking complex questions about contemporary society, war, and the Church's role in the world. Thus, this monk/writer was being drawn much more frequently into confronting questions about Christian responsibility during a time of rapid, and often surprising, change in his culture.[151]

[151] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years, 1960-1963* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), xv.

Notably, Kramer does not ask why Merton is engaging in these new concerns when his stated goal for nearly two decades was to seek silence and solitude. He simply says it is paradoxical without asking why the paradox exists. Could it be Merton really was not as interested in solitude as he claimed, or could it be his new interests were evasions from the dying to self he knew would be necessary were he to truly seek solitude? He claimed, "If I need solitude, it's because I need to be *nothing*, to disappear, to be completely obscure and forgotten – *tamquam purgamenta huius mundi*. I am fearfully ashamed of the stupid public image which is attached to the name of Thomas Merton!"[152] Yet, at every turn when solitude is offered he finds excuses to evade it.[153] For certain, the new bent to Merton's writing caused a new drama within his monastic community. Through the 1950's it was Merton against his abbot and Merton against the superiors of his order because they were to his mind acting through self-concern, ignorance, and sheer tyranny.[154] With the issue of his transfer settled in the negative he immediately enters

---

[152] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 174.

[153] For instance, when Dom Fox offers him the use of the tool shed that Merton names "St. Anne's" he spends his time there researching books and writing. When Dom Sortais, the Fr. General of the order offered him the opportunity to live as a hermit full-time in 1955 he declined, when a more remote building was offered for his use as a hermitage in 1960 he continued to spend most of his time there writing and when he was given permission to live at the hermitage full-time again in 1965 he continued to spend most of his time writing, corresponding, entertaining guests, and making frequent excursions into town to visit friends and acquaintances.

[154] For instance, in a letter dated May 3, 1955 to the Prior General of the Camaldolese Order he wrote, "In January, a Passionist spiritual director told me to ask for permission to go to Camaldoli. The Father Prior was in agreement with this, and he asked the Father Abbot, who absolutely refused the request, with no explanation. Dom James has always done everything possible to block and hinder my attempts to transfer to Camaldoli, and he will not even permit me to consult with a Carthusian. He intercepts any letters which arrive from a Charterhouse [the name given to Carthusian monasteries], even the ones marked 'conscience matter.'" See Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*,

into a new battle, this time with the censors of his order as well as his superiors and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in general whom Merton often portrayed as right-wing fanatics with little or no concern for the Gospel or the poor.

Simultaneously, however, Merton was gaining some ground on his efforts to achieve more solitude and silence. In 1953 when Merton was attempting to join the Camaldolese, Abbot Fox had given him permission to spend some time each day in an old tool shed that Merton cleaned up and named "St. Anne's." He enjoyed this tremendously, although Dom Fox observed he spent most of his time there researching books and writing rather than praying. Nevertheless, the desire to live as a full-time hermit continued to return and as Merton found himself ever more at odds with the monastic establishment and the form of monastic culture practiced at Gethsemani he continued to search for ways to either leave Gethsemani or live there apart from the monastic community. In 1960 Merton convinced the abbot to have a small building constructed in the woods on the monastery property at some distance from the monastery itself. The purpose of the building was to serve as a place to host ecumenical gatherings and retreatants and where he too could spend more time in solitude. This new hermitage he was to occupy became more important to him in the early 1960's as he sought to

---

111. Or again, in his journal entry for July 30, 1959 he wrote, "And Again I am faced with the problem that this so-called contemplative monastery *ruins* real contemplatives, or makes life unbearable for them. Or can I say it is a "problem" when it has ceased to perplex me? Causes have effects. I am not absolutely sure I can point out the exact causes but in general: the place being a machine, an institution, in which personal values hardly count, in which what matters is the prosperity and reputation of the community and everything else comes after that . . ." See Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 312.

distance himself more from the monastery.[155] At first he was allowed to spend afternoons there, then in 1962 he spends his first full day, and in 1964 he is allowed to spend the night. Finally, on August 20, 1965, having completed his last duties as novice master, he retires full-time to the hermitage. It appeared Merton finally got what he had so ardently desired for twenty years.

Merton appears genuinely happy in his hermitage. On August 25, 1965, he writes, "The five days I have had in real solitude have been a revelation, and whatever questions I may have had about it are answered. Over and over again I see that this life is what I have always hoped it would be and always sought. A life of peace, silence, purpose, meaning. It is not always easy, but calls for a blessed and salutary effort – and a little of this goes a long way. Everything about it is rewarding."[156] Already in October, however, he remarks that he is not really taking his eremitical vocation seriously writing on the 18th, "The first two months here have been a bit slack, I think. Fasted for one week (Ember week), no real vigils, prayer has been mediocre and I have concentrated too much on reading and work – with a kind of intellectual gluttony. So now I have got to emphasize prayer more: what else is there?"[157] Apparently, there was quite a lot else. On October 23rd, he met with his former novice Ernesto Cardenal who had just been ordained a priest in Nicaragua. Cardenal was planning to found a new monastery in Central

---

[155] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 339; Merton's feelings toward Gethsemani at this time can be measured by such remarks as the following from November 2, 1959: "Every time I go to Chapter [a general meeting of the professed monks of the house] such ties as still bind me to Gethsemani are weakened still more.".

[156] Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, 283.

[157] Ibid., 306.

America committed to the new, more open, yet contemplative form of monasticism Merton had been writing about. Suddenly Merton's certainty regarding the hermitage being "God's will" and the fulfillment of his destiny is nowhere to be found. He writes about the meeting:

> Had a very good visit. He spoke of his project for the Solentiname community (small, isolated island in Lake of Nicaragua, truly *remote!*) and wants me very much to come as spiritual father. Pablo Antonio [Cuadra], etc. all join in telling me to come. They are willing to go direct to the Pope with a petition signed by scores of Nicaraguan intellectuals, etc. and even the President. Certainly this much is from God, and I can only consent. I am sure even Rome will be very favorable. I am also sure that once again Dom James will do everything to block it.[158]

This is a typical example of how broad Merton's objectives could swing in a moment's time. One instant he is joyful to be a committed hermit; the next, he is complaining that he won't be allowed to march off to do "God's will" in Nicaragua. About two weeks after his visit with Cardenal he makes what I believe a very pointed observation about his new life: "Old fashioned idea: that the solitary life and indeed the Christian life is a struggle with invisible powers. All this is discussed even by monks. Yet is the Bible so wrong? I think I experience it more and more: as to what these powers are, who can clearly say: but one experiences their persuasion, their use of our weakness to prompt us to choices which, if followed out logically, would wreck us totally."[159] One wonders whether Merton was under the influence of these powers far more than he realized.

---

[158] Ibid., 307.

[159] Ibid., 312.

Another important entry from December 7th of 1965 shows Merton continuing to struggle with solitude and activity. He appears to be coming to the realization that the course of life he has chosen means the literal annihilation of self; something for which he is not at all prepared:

> I realize dimly that there is something else trying to break through into my awareness. Clearly all this fussing about defining my position on this or that contemporary issue is secondary (what I held in regard to *ends* is clear. As to immediate political means I am in no position to judge!). It has its place – but I see how foolish it would be to become involved in it as if it were of primary importance.
>
> What is primary? God's revelation of Himself to me *in Christ* and my response of faith. In the concrete, this means, for me, my present life in solitude, acceptance of its true perspectives and demands, and the work of slow reorientation that goes on. Each day, a little, I realize that my old life is breaking loose and will eventually fall off, in pieces, gradually. What then? My solitude is not like Rilke's ordered to a poetic explosion. Nor is it a mere deepening of religious consciousness. What is it then? What has been so far only a theological conception, or an image, has to be sought and loved. "Union with God!" *So mysterious that in the end man would perhaps do anything to evade it*, once he realizes it means the *end* of his own Ego-self-realization, once for all. Am I ready? Of course not. Yet the course of my life is set in this direction.[160]

But *is* the direction set toward the end of his own Ego-self-realization?. Merton's commitment to the eremitical life appears quite tenuous. It appears it was not out of a sheer delight in power, as Merton supposed, that Dom Fox would not allow him to travel and restricted his communication and correspondence. More than anyone Fox knew the delicate nature of Merton's fascination with solitude and was just about the only one (including Merton) trying to foster it in the right direction. Just how right Fox was came to light in a few short months when Merton is drawn once again into an all-absorbing

[160] Ibid., 322. Emphasis mine.

drama. Mott writes, "Dom James [Fox] made it clear that life within the walls of Gethsemani was one of freely accepted suffering and penitential grace, while beyond the enclosure walls, there was little hope any man could survive temptation, and the chief trouble was women. Others have confirmed that the greatest and most immediate risk Dom James saw for the monk outside the enclosure was women."[161] Mott writes further, "Dom James trusted Father Louis within the monastery and he showed that trust. He did not trust Merton outside the enclosure walls. In time the abbot showed trust in others. He made his lack of confidence in Father Louis all too obvious to Merton, and nothing rankled Merton more than this."[162] Was Dom Fox a prude? Did he view his monks too much as immature children? Or was he a realist who understood from decades of experience that no matter how good one's intentions may be, nature remains a powerful force that needs to be fostered within a realistic context. Was it realistic to allow monks to wander out of the monastery and expect them to remain chaste without the supports and boundaries of the cloister? In Merton's case it was not.

In March of 1966 Merton is coming to grips with the need to sever ties with the world and truly enter the solitude he has chosen. In a very accurate and frank entry on March 8th he writes:

> The solitary life itself reduces itself to a simple need – to make the choices which constantly imply preference for solitude fully understood . . . I find myself confronted with these choices repeatedly – they present themselves in their own way, and what they add up to these days is the question of emotional dependence on other people . . . Over and over again I have to make small decisions here and there, in regard to one or other. Distractions and obsessions are resolved in this way. What the resolution amounts to, in the end: letting go of the imaginary and the absent and returning to the present, the real, what is in front of my nose. Each

[161] Ibid., 281.

[162] Ibid., 280.

> time I do this I am more present, more alone, more detached, more clear, better able to pray. Failure to do it means confusions, weakness, hesitation, fear – and all the way through to anguish and nightmares . . . So, when it comes to 'preparing for death' – in my case it means simply this reiterated decision for solitude as the reality called for me by God, as my penance and cleansing, as my paying off debts, as my return to my right mind, and as my place of worship and prayer.[163]

He recognizes the challenges of the life he has chosen, but is confident about entering into the process of letting go and focusing ever more on God. Six weeks later, however, his confidence is once again shaken:

> It has been a day of struggle and prayer for me – the need for inner freedom, the urgency of constant work, and the difficulty of getting back into solitude after the hospital. In fact, there is now a real doubt in my mind about the value of the whole hermit experiment as it is here. Certainly it means more to me than the artificialities of the community, but this is artificial and arbitrary in its own way. I would organize it otherwise if I could – more open, less rigid. But I have no way of doing so, and really perhaps it is best to have to take it, as I do, on someone else's terms, especially if that other is an Abbot with whose views I in no way agree.[164]

Here he does not want to let go, to have things so "rigid." He is calling into question his entire vocation as a hermit that he has been discerning and for which he has been clamoring for years. It is suddenly artificial, although he does not explain how or why it is artificial other than to suggest it is so simply because things are not how he would have them be. Again, he is blaming Dom Fox for his troubles when Dom Fox is only establishing the parameters of the life he himself claims he wants. What Merton really

---

[163] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, 1966-1967* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 26.

[164] Ibid., 42.

wants is to do whatever he wants whenever he feels like it. This, as Dom Fox argued consistently, is Merton's trouble, what is preventing him from progressing in the spiritual path. So, what caused such an abrupt change in Merton's feelings regarding the hermitage?

On April 10, 1966 Merton makes this apparently innocent entry into his journal commenting on the progress of his healing following an operation undergone at the local hospital in Louisville:

> One week after the operation Friday in Passion Week, I was able to get up and go out to walk a while on the grass, and this made an enormous difference and also did the fact that I got a very friendly and devoted student nurse working on my compresses etc. and this livened things up considerably. In fact we were getting perhaps too friendly by the time she went off on her Easter vacation, but her affection – undisguised and frank – was an *enormous* help in bringing me back to life fast.[165]

Thus, begins Merton's months-long affair with "M," a young nursing student over whom he seriously considers leaving the monastic life. The "restrictions" imposed by Dom Fox on his correspondence and communications intensify Merton's frustration once he returns to the hermitage and desires to continue his relationship with "M." Suddenly, the "whole hermit experiment as it is here" is called into question. Note, the solitary life is no longer the "reality called for me by God," but an "experiment."

One would think that somewhere along the line, after having been proven wrong so often, Merton would have acknowledged the prudence and insight of his Abbot in guiding him toward fulfilling the life Merton himself claims he desires. This never

[165] Ibid., 38.

occurs, however, and Merton continues to view Fox for the rest of his life as an adversary with whom he shares little in the way of monastic ideals. The significance of this relationship between Merton and "M" doesn't rest in the vindication of Dom Fox, however. There are two other reasons why this event is important to Merton's spiritual development. First, it is another, rather blatant and serious, manifestation of Merton's continuing inability to confront reality and his tendency to avoid the difficult path of self-annihilation. Secondly, this relationship, rather than being seen as the immature, selfish, and harmful action (to himself, to "M," to "M's" fiancée and family, as well as to Merton's monastic community) of a man fleeing from his personal and communal responsibilities, is nearly invariably portrayed as an epiphany in Merton's life from which he at long last gains emotional and spiritual freedom. I will later compare this relationship with another prominent diversion in Merton's life that is equally hailed as enlightening and symbolic of his "final integration;" that of his relationship with Zen and his journey to the East.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hagiography In Motion

In the first part of this work we looked at the life of Thomas Merton to uncover any prominent themes that may have influenced his involvement in Zen, social justice, and monastic reform. We saw that, as is generally noted in most biographies, Merton was prone to evasion, an inability to commit himself, a critical nature that often unjustly condemned not only systems and structures without due consideration, but individuals as well whenever they obstructed what he determined was "God's will." As I say, much of this has been pointed out elsewhere, however, in virtually every instance, these detrimental aspects of Merton's character are either dismissed as insignificant, or as stepping stones to his great awakening. I doubt that anyone would argue that adversity, either exterior or interior, is useless in forming character and virtue, but was it so in the case of Merton? Did the events of his life bring him closer to "final integration" or enlightenment or sanctity, or were they more or less a string of evasions from growth and maturity?

In this chapter I will review a number of biographies and studies of Merton that take a generally positive stance toward his development and view him as a model of the spiritually awakened man. I will examine whether their conclusions are justified based on Merton's own actions as we have seen them revealed in the previous chapters. The general attitude taken in these works is that Merton is a seer and mystic who blessed and continues to bless the troubled masses with his deep wisdom as they seek a way to an integral and peaceful existence. I will argue that, in fact, Merton was just as confused,

entangled, and stricken as anyone not only at the beginning or middle of his life, but through, and perhaps especially, to the very end and that any wisdom he may have expressed was not a reflection of his own experience, but the result of his talent as an author to make the wisdom of others appealing to the contemporary person. Moreover, I will show that the enterprise in which these authors engage, whom I will here refer to as hagiographers, manifests the tendency of a certain society to idealize an individual in order to strengthen it and justify its own existence.

Hagiography exists in all major world religions. Often times the works are pedagogic or simply meant to edify. In Christianity, hagiography was often used as a sort of measuring stick against which an individual or community could take stock of itself. The hagiographical portrait of the saint showed how the life of Jesus would have been played out had he lived in that particular age, giving people the opportunity to see if their own lives measured up. The measure was the life of Christ and the object of the literary picture being drawn was to conform the life of the saint to that of Christ's, to show through the historical events of the saint's life the paschal mystery renewed in the context of a new time and place. This could be done through a variety of ways such as recounting how the saint once searched for a piece of fruit on a tree as Jesus had and then drawing out some spiritual meaning from the event in conformity with the events meaning in the Gospel. The most common and important way, however, was to accentuate that the saint underwent a great ordeal, had suffered and been persecuted unjustly, and demonstrated his or her heroic virtues of faith, hope, and charity in the midst of this injustice. I find that, to a vast degree, literature surrounding the life of Thomas Merton fits this genre.

The mere fact that literature about Merton is often hagiographical is not of itself pertinent to this study. What does pertain to it is whether the hagiography is accurate in that it portrays the facts correctly and for the right motive. Are the claims of Merton hagiographers regarding his spiritual prowess true? Are their claims regarding his ordeal and persecution accurate? Are the intentions of these hagiographers to establish a portrait of the life of Jesus in the twentieth century? I would answer no to these questions and I think this bears great significance regarding Merton's interest in other religions, his concern with social, ecclesial, and monastic renewal, and his particularly evident interest in Zen. It appears to me that this modern hagiography is not so much concerned with portraying how the life of Jesus would have been played out in the modern world, but is concerned, rather, with projecting the modern secular ideal of the "integrated man," back upon Jesus by associating their model of this integrated man with Christ. The purpose is not to portray a standard or measure of Jesus against which one could judge one's life, but to justify one's life as it is by creating a fictional Jesus who is the epitome of the socially conscious, religiously tolerant, ethically pliable twentieth century man.

The authors and works I will review in this chapter are Donald Grayston's *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, Anthony Padovano's *The Human Journey, Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century*, William Shannon's *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, and Kenneth Bragan's *The Making of a Saint*. What I hope to reveal here is the unfounded nature of these authors' estimation of Merton and his significance as a spiritual model. This will in turn shed light upon the validity of his contribution to interfaith dialogue, his interest in Zen and the manner in which he is identified with Zen, and his concern with monastic renewal.

Grayston and the Noonday Demon

In his work *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon* Grayston claims that after the experience of major spiritual trials in the 1950's Merton has worked out the major kinks in his spiritual journey and moves to a plane of high spiritual awareness and fruitfulness in the 1960's. As he remarks, "For Merton it was a time when he worked out some crucial matters for himself, which would manifest themselves in the years following in mature living and writing."[166] Grayston says the letters which he examines regarding Merton's desire and attempt to enter the Camaldolese Order "give us a benchmark, a beginning point from which to trace the spiritual growth of their author/recipient/subject from the restless and unhappy man that he was at the time of their writing to the far more peaceful and self-accepting person that he was at the end of his life."[167] In his preface Grayston also remarks, "I am trusting that any critical comments I make about Merton will be read in the purview of my essential view of him as the outstanding Christian spiritual writer of the twentieth century."[168]

We see here that Grayston clearly believes Merton to have progressed spiritually in the 1960's, approximating the "final integration" Merton had written about.[169] During the 1950's he was not self-accepting or at peace, but was, restless and unhappy. He moved then from a state of disintegration to one of integration and mature living during

---

[166] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 8.

[167] Ibid., 10.

[168] Ibid., xvi.

[169] Thomas Merton, *The Final Integration*, In *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013). This is an essay Merton wrote to describe what he envisioned as the goal of monastic life – and the Christian life in general.

the last years of his life. In demonstrating his point Grayston refers to quite a few unedifying aspects of Merton's character during the 1940's and 1950's and explains that they must be understood in the context of his ultimate opinion of Merton as "the outstanding Christian spiritual writer of the twentieth century."

Grayston claims Merton was subject to a spiritual affliction called *acedia*. He describes Merton as experiencing the affliction in three stages that he calls the *preliminary acedia* lasting from approximately 1949 to 1952, the *greater acedia* lasting from approximately 1952 to 1956, and the *lesser acedia* lasting from approximately 1956 to 1959.

According to Grayston the *preliminary acedia* of Merton was "critical for Merton's spiritual and theological development, a time after which his perspectives expanded from the narrow focus on life in the monastery that had marked the years since his arrival there in 1941." During the *greater acedia* Merton no longer merely talks about leaving Gethsemani, but makes an actual attempt to do so by applying for a *transitus* or canonical transfer from one monastic order to another, in this case, from the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance to the Order of Camaldolese. The *lesser acedia* covers the subsequent period when, his attempts to join the Camaldolese having failed, he explores the possibility of moving to some remote area or joining an "experimental" Benedictine monastery in Mexico.

Grayston's treatment of this crucial period in Merton's life is valuable and accurate in that it reveals the tendency of Merton to evade and escape. However, as is typical of most Merton scholars, Grayston interprets Merton's condition as one of expanding consciousness and spiritual progress. He intimates that following the

experience of the *lesser acedia* Merton made great strides in spiritual maturity and that the acedia was for the most part gone and no longer effected his behavior and aspirations. As with so many writers Grayston attempts to depict the final years of Merton's life as demonstrating his enlightened state. Yet if we look closely we will see that Merton's life was in reality unchanged during the 1960's and, if anything, reveals a deeper slide into disintegration and spiritual apathy.

Grayston identifies several characteristics of the spiritual malady *acedia*. The term is one that is taken from the writings of the desert fathers and describes a condition that is common among monks after they have progressed for some time within the monastery or hermitage cell. They begin to experience intense restlessness, irritability, and especially the desire to flee to a new place where "the grass is greener." Grayston offers this description of acedia taken from Evagrius' *Praktikos*:

> The demon of *acedia* – also called the noonday demon – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour [10:00 a.m.] and besieges the soul until the eighth hour [2:00 p.m.]. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour [3:00 p.m., dinnertime], to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren might appear from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred. The demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out

> of the fight. No other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and expressible joy arise out of this struggle.[170]

Grayston then presents a description of acedia by St. Cassian who chronicled many of the sayings of the desert fathers and described their spiritual battles:

> Once [*acedia*] has seized possession of a wretched mind it makes a person horrified at where he is, disgusted with his cell, and also disdainful and contemptuous of the brothers who live with him . . . as being careless and unspiritual . . . He groans quite frequently that spending such a long time there is of no profit to him and that he will possess no spiritual fruit for as long as he is attached to that group of people . . . He makes a great deal of far-off and distant monasteries, describing such places as more suited to progress and more conducive to salvation, and also depicting the fellowship of the brothers there as pleasant and of an utterly spiritual cast . . . Thereupon he says that he cannot be saved if he remains in that place.[171]

Grayston comments about this passage that, "Any reader of Merton's dairies for the years 1952 to 1960 will immediately recognize the ways in which this psycho-spiritual phenomenon appeared in Merton's life.[172] This is certainly true as it reflects Merton's attitude and struggles to the tee. Yet, it is puzzling why Grayston demarks the years 1952-1960 when these symptoms were present in Merton writings not only for those years, but for nearly his *entire life,* from the time he was a teenager at Ockham to the time of his death. There may not have been the exact same struggle of desiring to leave Gethsemani, but the evasive behavior, inability to commit himself, the questioning of

---

[170] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 17.

[171] Ibid., 18.

[172] Ibid.

authority and structure, the critical view of others – all these were part of Merton's character from an early age and there is nothing to suggest this character ever changed. The only relatively peaceful and constructive period in Merton's life, in fact, was his first five or six years in the monastery; ironically, this is the period most of his biographers describe as a period of immaturity, naiveté, and needless introspection. A closer look at what Grayston identifies as markers revealing the presence of acedia in Merton's life will allow us to see if these characteristics are indeed specific to the time frame Grayston claims Merton was subject to acedia. He identifies the first stage of the monk's acedia as boredom, then disgust with the monastery, complaints he is making no progress, praises other monasteries, and lastly, he concludes he will make no progress if he remains where he is. As they stand, these markers appear specific to the monastic life, however, they are so only because Evagrius, who describes them, is speaking of monks. If we abstract the general mental state, we see that the condition can apply to virtually anyone. They certainly apply I believe to Merton's state as a young man at Ockham when he viewed himself as superior to others and disgusted with the conventional structures of the school. They apply as well to Merton's time at Cambridge when he was bored with academic life and spent most of his time carousing and escaping his academic responsibilities. They apply to his time at Columbia when he blamed all the world's troubles on the narrow-mindedness of conventional thought. They apply to his time as a teacher at St. Bonaventure when he was dissatisfied with his work as a teacher and writer and was convinced he had to be doing something else more idealistic. Then we come to a period when the conditions do not apply; his first years as a monk.

During Merton's first years at Gethsemani he appears to achieve a certain degree of integration and peace. He is convinced of the goodness of his vocation and that he is in the right place for the right reasons. This period lasts only three or four years, however, before he once again begins to question the course his life has taken.

In the mid 1940's Merton begins to complain of writing and the great detriment writing has had upon his spiritual life as it utilized much of his time and energy. He then begins to complain about the crowdedness of Gethsemani, the lack of solitude and silence and the amount of work required of the monks. With the election of James Fox as abbot Merton's complaints and protests intensify greatly and he begins to attack Dom Fox directly as the culprit for his problems. He also becomes ever more critical of his brother monks during this period, viewing them as unenlightened, spiritually immature or without zeal. Merton admits his uppity attitude when he writes in June of 1960, "I have a natural tendency to become an escapist, a snob, a narcissist. (And my problems arise largely from guilt and attempts to cover up this guilt from myself and other.)"[173] His criticism of his brother monks at times appears very harsh and at times outright unjust and tyrannical as though they were peons compared to his enlightened mind. At times Merton appears to epitomize those he criticizes when he notes that, "Scheles points out: those who criticize out of resentment do not really want anything to be changed, bettered or reformed. They pretend to want an improvement. But when they are put in a position to collaborate in making things better they are impotent and frustrated – deprived of what they really want; an opportunity to criticize."[174] Rather than continue in the monastery

[173] Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 8.

[174] Ibid., 100.

and work for renewal and the valid changes he desired, he distanced himself further and further both socially and physically from his community. Rather than make the most of the solitude he demanded and was given, he chose to spend his time writing, corresponding, and engaging in conferences and directing retreats. He had every opportunity to live the solitary and silent life he claimed he wanted, but when it was given him he fled from it and continued his criticisms.

At this point Merton's characteristics are directed principally at the monastery and Abbot Fox since he has come to identify the monastery and its abbot as the chief antagonists in his spiritual drama. Eventually, however, once his attempt to leave Gethsemani for Camaldoli is over, the sphere of his complaints broadens. Although he has complained incessantly through the years that writing, more than anything, has been undermining his spiritual life, he does not decrease his writing projects, but expands them. He publishes numerous books in the late 1950's and into the 1960's. No longer does he focus upon the contemplative life and monasticism, but he has now branched out into concerns for social justice, arguing he has a responsibility to do so even though such writings and interests are, by his own admission foreign to his contemplative vocation. Although he is given more opportunity for solitude during the early 1960's he chooses to spend much of it on activities in direct opposition to solitude. For instance, in July of 1960 he writes, "The trouble is this being a 'writer' and one of the most absurd things I have got into is this business of dialogues and retreats. This has to be faced."[175] But Merton doesn't face it. He instead expands such activities even as he moves closer and closer to being a "hermit."

---

[175] Ibid., 18.

In the 1960's he continues to manifest the characteristic of acedia which involves the criticism of superiors and other monks. He begins to attack the Cistercian order and his superiors insofar as they attempt to reign in his writing interests and temper his extra-monastic activity. He complains vehemently against Dom Fox in a manner that most Merton scholars believe is completely unjustified. He writes, for instance:

> Interior struggle because of the bitterness and selfishness that are in me, and the lack of love . . . I should love my abbot, my order, my community. But really I doubt if I do, I doubt if I *can* love them spontaneously. I am too obsessed by the unfairness, the injustice that was done me in Rome by the Abbot, and above all embittered and frustrated by the fact that he was able to do this with a good conscience, subjectively, thinking himself perfectly right. And he does the same to everybody. His deviousness, his ambivalence, his trickery, his business manipulations are to him pure guileless simplicity because, while he does these things, he does them "with a pure intention."[176]

Authors such as Grayston and Cunningham, who are otherwise very sympathetic to Merton, admit readily that Merton's characterization of Dom Fox is often unjustified and an immature expression of Merton's own self-will and frustration at not having things his way.

In August of 1960 Merton describes the interior change he is undergoing as his extra-monastic interests vie against his life as a cloistered monk:

> I cannot get away from the fact that some of the great moral problems of my life are ones I have never fully faced. (And yet in another sense they are not so great and not really problems. Do I really think I have something to *face* or *just* something to *tidy up* in my mind. Yet I am not inclined to tidiness.)
>
> *Great moral problem* – my evasion and disaffection from XXth century society. My refusal of all political commitments as absurd. Loud bluster in early

[176] Ibid., 159.

> poems about the futility of "the world." These are just noises made for my own comfort.
>
> Note – I have now rejected the absurd and formalistic pose of "the monks" which is in favor here: that we have "left the world" and have nothing more to do with it; its pomps and politics.
>
> On the contrary, it has become very clear that the monastery is deeply committed on a political level. We *have to vote*; our vote *counts* very appreciably (one of the biggest precincts in Nelson County is ours – or at any rate we turn in one of the biggest votes).
>
> Here we are subjected to all the political clichés and prejudices favored by the Abbot (v.g. for Kennedy, ag[ain]st Castro, conviction that the Russians *only* are warmongers, etc.). I am therefore a tool of something against which I *must* protest.
>
> An interior ordering of thoughts and opinions, a *mere judgment of conscience* is absolutely not enough.
>
> Yet I do have to strike out a position. Here is the problem, for mere *thinking* is a delusion. The answer has to be worked out in action and I cannot act.
>
> I am in effect a political prisoner at Gethsemani.[177]

Apart from being an example of Mertonian melodrama, this journal entry notes the irony that while Merton protests against not being able to act, he refuses to act in the principal manner he claims a monk should act – through prayer and the witness of a life apart. He even ridicules the viewpoint of other monks who favor a more complete withdrawal from the world, while lobbying at every opportunity to be a hermit. The contradictions in his thought are so dense it is difficult to fathom how he could not be conscious of them. At the same time he is publishing books on contemplation he states that meditation is an evasion from reality. On August 22, 1960, he writes, "Can that mean that meditation was once for me an evasion from action? I know it certainly is so here for many and that's why meditation is blank."[178] If meditation is an evasion then why is he seeking solitude

[177] Ibid., 34.

[178] Ibid., 35.

and silence? And how could he be in a position to judge the hearts of his brother monks? Is his goal simply to be rid of people? At times it appears so.

Yet in his more discriminating moments he realizes and admits he is an escape artist who will use any distraction to evade the self-annihilation necessary to be a true contemplative. Perhaps that is the sense in which he questions the validity of his meditation. Perhaps he did use it not to engage in the highest of all actions – the encounter with God – but to carve the idol of his own image as a mystic and contemplative. In 1961 he writes:

> Someone accused me of being a "high priest" of creativity. Or at least of allowing people to regard me as one. This is perhaps true.
>
> The sin of *wanting to be a pontiff*, of wanting to be heard, of wanting converts, disciples. Being in a cloister, I thought I did not want this. Of course I did and everyone knows it . . .
>
> I have got to face the fact that there is in me a desire for survival as pontiff, prophet and writer, and this has to be renounced before I can be myself at last.[179]

Then he returns to his early monastic theme of the importance of prayer and witness writing in December of 1960, "It is simply time that I must pray intently for the needs of the whole world and not be concerned with other, "more effective" forms of action. For me prayer comes first, the other forms of action follow, if they have their place."[180] Yet one wonders when he could possibly have time to pray.

---

[179] Ibid., 87.

[180] Ibid., 74.

During this time Merton begins to form a new idea of monasticism that can accommodate his activities and brands as tyrannical and uncharitable all actions on behalf of his order and his abbot to guide his activities within the frame of Cistercian monasticism.

Finally, once Dom Fox retires as abbot and Merton's former student is elected as abbot, he is given permission for a lengthy leave from the monastery to visit other monastic settings and attend various conferences in the Western United States and the Far East. While on this leave from the monastery he divests himself of virtually all semblance of monastic life other than the celebration of the liturgy. His writings, correspondences, and conferences at this time continue to denigrate his order, his abbot, the Church in general, not to mention his views on the United States and Western Civilization. The only structures that appears relatively unscathed by his critiques are those of third world countries and Eastern religions which he tends to idealize in the same fashion he had idealized the Camaldolese and Carthusian orders a decade earlier. He is in 1968 not only dreaming about escaping the monastery, he actually has, and becomes involved in a whirlwind of travel and activity that continues to feed his so-called desire for solitude and silence – a solitude and silence he rejects each time it is offered.

It is difficult to see how Grayston can consider Merton to have matured or approximated a "final integration" in the 1960's when he was no closer to understanding what he even wanted or was trying to achieve. It is true that Merton wrote many inspiring works at this time and offered what many consider important contributions to the discussion of social, cultural, and religious issues of the time. It does not follow, however, to assume that merely because he wrote such things that he himself manifested

them in his life, especially when the evidence from his journals and correspondence indicate otherwise.

Merton may indeed have suffered the effects of acedia during his monastic life, however, I do not think the bulk of his difficulties and trials were the result of acedia, but from his refusal to follow the contemplative path he himself had articulated and aspired to in the 1940's and which he continued to acknowledge into the 1960's as the life he knew he was meant to live.[181] He writes in June of 1961:

> It all cleared up after High Mass when I saw my only solution is to do what I have always wanted to do, always known I should do, always been called to do: follow the way of emptiness and nothingness, read more of the "nothing" books than those of the others, forget my preoccupations with ten thousand absurdities, to know without wanting to be an authority, or else I will forever be a lackey of

[181] Merton makes many statements throughout the 1960's to the effect that he is meant to do nothing but pray, to allow his false-self to dissipate, and thus to make his most effective contribution to peace and justice. Another example is from October of 1961, "For my own part, I have one task left. To pray, to meditate, to enter into truth, to sit before the abyss, to be educated in the word of Christ and thus to make my contribution to world peace. There is not much left to be said." Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 166. Again, after many attempts to justify his involvement in social justice activities during 1961 and the beginning of 1962 he writes in May of 1962 regarding how he has wasted the opportunities for solitude and silence he has had, "Now I have got to get my life in order at last without desperation and without compromise. A long succession of wasted opportunities. The need for serious spiritual discipline, especially long periods of meditation. Going on my own, not being held within the limits of accepted practice and custom in the community. I owe it to the community, which has allowed me opportunities for it, more or less, to forge ahead where they do not go. This is certainly implied by the situation in which I have been placed . . . I have misused this to a great extent, thinking I was obliged to form a judgment concerning world affairs. That obligation is by no means certain, whereas my obligation to explore "the interior space" is absolutely clear." Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 221-222. In December of 1962 he writes, "One sees the emphasis on "contemplation" that was more accepted and popular in those days, in a new perspective. The language and outlook have changed, but not this substance, of a life totally surrendered to the will of God . . . This is what comes clear: not this or that approach to prayer, but the complete surrender to God. And I see too that I have never really so far come close to meeting this surrender." Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 281.

> pious journalists and editors; the right-thinking rabbit who gives birth to litters of editorials every morning before breakfast.[182]

Yet only a couple months later he is convinced he has been given a task directly by God to continue writing and actively engaging the world:

> In any case I have a clear obligation to participate, as long as I can, and to the extent of my abilities, in every effort to help a spiritual and cultural renewal of our time. This is the task that has been given me, and hitherto I have not been clear about it, in all its aspects and dimensions.
>
> To emphasize, clarify the living content of spiritual traditions, especially the Xtian, but also the Oriental, by entering myself deeply into their disciplines and experience, not for myself only but for all my contemporaries who may be interested and inclined to listen. This for the restoration of man's sanity and balance, that he may return to the ways of freedom and of peace, if not in my time, at least some day soon.[183]

Merton "has always known" that he was to follow the path of "nothingness" and avoid unnecessary activity, yet now he "knows" he is to enter more deeply into the disciplines and experiences of Eastern religions for the "restoration of man's sanity and balance." It is difficult to see how he would plan to enter "deeply" into the disciplines and experiences of other religions when, apparently, he cannot, even after twenty years in a cloistered monastery, enter deeply into his own religious discipline. The excitement of being the hero, the messiah, and saving the world once again distracts him from the simplicity of his vocation as a contemplative.

---

[182] Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 135.

[183] Ibid., 155.

The challenge of self-annihilation and the consecration of one's entire existence upon the contemplation of God was something to which Merton was keenly attracted since his days at Columbia University. It was also something to which he could never commit himself completely; the desire to be a great writer and achieve fame and success, to be known and appreciated as a spiritual leader, a mystic, a prophet – all these diverted him from his stated goal of union with God once he tasted the glory that followed upon the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Again, in August of 1965 he is still realizing the same need to die to self. Reflecting upon St. Anselm's *De Casu Diaboli* he writes, "The need to be entirely defined by a relationship with and orientation to God my Father, i.e., a life of sonship in which all that distracts from this relationship is seen as fatuous and absurd. How *real* this is! A reality I must constantly measure up to, it cannot be simply taken for granted. It cannot be lost in distraction. Distractedness is fatal – it brings one inexorably to the abyss."[184] Noting this, however, does not make it happen. Merton continues to engulf himself in correspondence, writing projects, excursions away from the monastery with friends – in short, to distract himself at every turn.

This tendency toward distraction erupted full-force when Merton became involved in a romantic relationship with a young nurse whom he identified as "M" in his journals. On March 25th of 1966 he underwent back surgery and during his rehabilitation following the surgery he became very friendly with "M" about whom he writes upon his return to the monastery, "I got a very friendly and devoted student nurse working on my compresses etc. and this livened things up considerably. In fact we were getting perhaps

[184] Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, 278.

too friendly by the time she went off on her Easter vacation, but her affection – undisguised and frank – was an *enormous* help in bringing me back to life fast."[185] That spring and summer saw a full-blown affair between Merton and his nurse during which he escaped from the monastery every chance he could, wrote streams of letters to his new love, and seriously considered leaving the monastery to get married. During this period Merton saw their relationship in idealic terms and his change in attitude and understanding regarding the relationship epitomizes his ability to be utterly disconnected with reality. On May 7, 1966, he wrote, "After supper [they had met for dinner at the Louisville Airport Diner] M. and I had a little while alone and went off by ourselves and found a quiet corner, sat on the grass out of sight and loved each other to ecstasy. It was beautiful, awesomely so, to love so much and to be loved, and to be able to say it all completely without fear and without observation."[186] Six months later he wrote:

> How evident it becomes now that this whole thing with M. was, in fact, an attempt to escape the demands of my vocation. Not conscious, certainly. But a substitution of human love (and erotic love after all) for a special covenant of loneliness and solitude which is the very heart of my vocation. I did not stand the test at all – but allowed that whole essence to be questioned and tried to change it. And could not see I was doing this. Fortunately God's grace protected me from the worst errors. My difficult return to my right way is a gift of His grace. But I think I am gradually getting back. Each morning I wake up feeling a little freer (though I don't remember dreaming of it) – just as last May each morning I awoke a little more captivated. And I now see how much anguish I suffered – but I could not let go! Now thank God, I can. But what will happen if she writes me another love letter. Somehow I don't think she will. I think it is clear to both of us that the affair is over – and that it has been very silly.[187]

---

[185] Merton, *Learning to Love*, 38.

[186] Ibid., 52.

[187] Ibid., 155.

As with his view of Gethsemani in the early 1940's, his view of the Camaldolese hermitage in the early 1950's, and his view of the monastic foundation in Cuernavaca directed by his friend Ernesto Cardenal in the late 1950's, Merton allows himself to become lost in a fantasy of greener pastures. This applies not only to people and places, but to ideas and religious traditions as well. It is my view that Merton's appeal to Zen, his involvement in social justice activities, and his concern for monastic renewal all spring from distraction and his need to escape from the commitment needed to die to self and truly be a contemplative.

Another characteristic that Grayston points out as indicative of acedia is the desire to depart from one's monastery and to praise the virtues of other monasteries. Again, this is something which Merton engages in long before what Grayston terms the *preliminary acedia* and which continues to the end of his life. In September of 1960 Merton is complaining his abbot has him virtually imprisoned at Gethsemani.[188] In his introduction to the fifth volume of Merton's journals *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, Robert Daggy notes Merton's continued restlessness:

> Certainly not graceful on the ground, the raven symbolizes the ambivalence and awkwardness that persist in Merton as he "dances" with specters of his own creation – the spectres of anger, angst, agitation, and alienation that he cannot seem to exorcise from within himself. As he dances, he himself *ravens* (in another sense of the word), seeking and attempting to seize gratification as monk, solitary, and writer. He "rapaciously" indulges his own will through what he sees but cannot seem to stop as indecision, procrastination, drift, and vacillation.[189]

[188] Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 40.

[189] Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, *xii*.

Daggy implies that this "dancing" is somehow a prelude to an epiphany fulfillment, yet one searches in vain to discover when it might have occurred.

In 1963 Merton is no closer to understanding his own vocation than he was in 1953 and he has the same desire to wander or flee from Gethsemani, although it may not be as focused as was his desire to join the Camaldolese. As Daggy writes, "The journal does not depict a man who has come to rest, a man who is settled in his self-conceived and longed-for hermit role. He is still "dancing," . . . trying to find his real *Auftrag*, or purpose, but finding it difficult to know what that is."[190] For years Merton had wanted to live as a hermit emulating the desert fathers of old, but after living the life he comes to realize it isn't what he expected. He was not prepared for the roughness of the life in the little building out in the woods.

Dom Fox, who had also been attracted to the solitary life from his youth, began in the early 1960's to investigate the possibility of erecting another or perhaps several other hermitages in the woods surrounding the monastery. This was an event, by the way, that completely contradicted Merton's opinion of Fox as closedminded about the eremitical life. When Merton is informed of the possibility he becomes ecstatic and begins to scout out possible sites for the hermitage in a place called Edelin's Hallow, hoping to abandon his own hermitage that lacks the conveniences he desires. He writes, "Speaking perhaps unwisely, yet soberly, the thing that I was left with was the most overwhelming conviction that I was called by God simply to live the rest of my life totally alone in that

---

[190] Ibid., *xiv*.

hollow . . . It would mean real poverty, real solitude, real interiority, real renunciation, a silence that would break ties of identification with *all movements* monastic or otherwise."[191] The question presents itself, why would *this* place mean all these things when the hermitage where he resides at the time could suffice just as well? The answer, of course, is that no place would suffice for these things as long as Merton continues to escape into distractions. It was not the place, but the man.

Merton realizes this and reflects upon it often in his journals. It is odd, however, that each time he reflects upon it, it is as though it is the first time he has done so, like an elderly person repeating a story to someone that he had just told the day before. In April of 1967 he sums up the situation again writing:

> Last night I dreamed of M. Today, again, I realize how confused I have been – not just because of her but in general because of my slackness, my imprudence, my inconsistency, my frivolity. I suppose also my laziness. It is certainly true that a great deal has gone wrong in my life. Yet I do not know precisely how or where, and I can hardly pin it on any one symptom. My falling in love so badly was not a cause but an effect, and I think really it all comes from roots that had simply lain dormant since I entered the monastery. So too in my writing, my persistent desire to be somebody, which is really so stupid. I know I don't really need it or want it, and yet I keep going after it. Not that I should stop writing or publishing – but I should not let myself be flattered and cajoled into the business, letting myself be used, making statements and declarations, "being there," "appearing." Pictures appear (without any desire of mine, to tell the truth) and I am ashamed of myself.
>
> At the root l- an attraction for this kind of publicity nevertheless. Or rather, I would like to be known, loved, admired, and yet *not* in this cheap and silly way. But is there any other way? In my case, if I were more serious about remaining unknown I would not be so quick to accept what eventually shames me.[192]

[191] Ibid., 188.

[192] Merton, *Learning to Love*, 215.

Seeing Merton's return to his distractions, his desire for approval and fame, his avoidance of everything necessary to be a contemplative, one wonders what is the true motivation of his life? What drives him to be involved in all the many activities that consume his life? Is it contemplation, the desire to truly understand other people, other cultures, other religions? Or is it nothing more altruistic than self-love and narcissism?

Grayston's hermeneutic of acedia in understanding Merton's actions in the 1950's is valuable. It appears Merton certainly did suffer from "the noonday demon," however, having reviewed Merton's life throughout the 1960's it becomes very difficult to accept his premise that the acedia subsided after 1959 and that Merton began to attain a level of "final integration." It appears, moreover, that there was more than mere acedia involved in Merton's efforts to leave Gethsemani.

It was not simply that Merton was seeing other monasteries and other possibilities as being potentially more profitable for his spiritual growth, nor was it his desire to escape the demands of contemplation. There was a true narcissism and tyrannical spirit evident in Merton's choices and behavior. His treatment of Dom Fox, his attitude toward his brother monks, and his regard for others in the Church who held the responsibility of overseeing not merely the life of an individual monk, but the entire Cistercian Order and its influence upon the universal Church, reveal an individual who was concerned primarily with his own will, who was tied up in his own little universe, who had, apparently, not even taken the first step toward being the "universal man" to which he aspired. Merton appears to have been a self-engrossed individual who at every turn avoided the process of self-annihilation. The avoidance took many forms: writing,

escaping to another monastery, correspondence, social activism, criticism, and a feigned attraction to alternative paths toward enlightenment.

Padovano and the Symbol of a Century

In his book *The Human Journey* Anthony Padovano portrays Merton as an individual who in his own life symbolized the twentieth century, a century which Padovano says drew its creativeness from the very conflicts and contradictions that characterized it. Merton's personal conflicts and contradictions fueled his journey to an ever-expanding consciousness as Padovano writes, "The tension in Merton between anarchy and discipline proved creative. Too much of either would have destroyed him as an artist. The secret of his genius has something to do with balance between extremes."[193] And again, "Thomas Merton explored in his own life the convergence of authority and conscience, of sacred commitments and secular options, of Western ideas and oriental beliefs, of medieval life-styles and modern forms of social protest."[194] There appears in Padovano's book the hypothesis that the conflict within Merton's life was fruitful in that it inspired creativity and exploration while Merton's time of conformity was barren and unproductive. The iconoclast, the nonconformist, the antinomian in Merton are celebrated while the faithful, sacrificial, trusting aspects of him are regarded as rigid bonds that held him back from freedom.

Padovano sees Merton's nonconformity as the cause of his great influence stating, "This distrust of the status quo would lead him later to become a significant

[193] Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 7.

[194] Ibid., *xvi*.

influence in ecclesial renewal, Cistercian reform, and social revolution. Merton wanted to transcend arbitrary human limitations and thereby become a universal symbol. He wanted to harmonize in himself East and West, past and present, secular and sacred."[195] Padovano defends against the suggestion this might sound arrogant by claiming that Merton was nevertheless a very self-effacing person. Yet, one could also ask if desiring to be all things, did he ultimately stand for anything? Yet again, how can one "transcend arbitrary human limitations" by embracing another arbitrary human path? In avoiding conventional boundaries was not Merton simply erecting another human boundary, namely, the "distrust of the status quo"?

It is certainly true that Merton was often self-effacing and at times readily acknowledged his shortcomings. In fact, one of the major themes running through his journals is the debilitating effect his many and insatiable interests has upon his spiritual life and the efficacy of his vocation. From the late 1950's on there is a conflict running in the back of Merton's consciousness between his desire to devote himself to contemplation and his desire to involve himself in drama that he knows is ultimately foreign to the purpose of his vocation. His bent toward drama and his involvement in conflict are to a large extent not the result of true concern for truth or justice, but a desire for publicity, to be "in the game," or to serve simply as a distraction from the far more boring, uninspiring, and anonymous life of a cloistered contemplative monk. Self-effacement can hardly be considered a virtue, however, if it is not accompanied by a sincere desire and effort to resolve one's shortcomings. Many of the spiritual writers with whom Merton was well acquainted would consider such self-effacement false humility.

[195] Ibid., 14.

In describing Merton's evolution in thought Padovano, as did many others, including Merton himself, contrasts Merton's earlier writing with his later writings to highlight what he considers a much richer insight into reality. Commenting on Merton's understanding of the Eucharist Padovano writes:

> In *The Living Bread*, he writes quiet simply that Jesus lives in the world only because there are Catholic priests to ensure Christ's survival. Such a statement today astonishes and disappoints. It reduces the reality of Jesus to what is considered the larger reality of the Church. It limits the vitality of Christ to one group in the Church. It exalts the ordained ministry to a position more crucial than that of Christ. It makes the Christ of history and the Christ of the world dependent upon Catholics and clerics only. Later, however, he writes in a more sophisticated way about the power and supremacy of a God whose freedom denies us and affirms us, grounds our freedom and becomes its adversary. Merton was always better when his categories were dialectical rather than dogmatic. It was a long theological journey, however, from a Christ made subject to the control and competence of priests to a God whose loftiness eludes and encounters us at the same time.[196]

Padovano obviously sees a positive evolution in Merton's thought here. Two things strike me, however, that Padovano does not seem to consider. First, Padovano interprets Merton's remarks in this selection about priests and the Church as narrow in thought and dogmatic, but in his book Merton is meditating upon the mysterious ways that God has chosen to work within the context of humanity and human history so that he can be known and so that the Church can participate in that unveiling of his presence on earth. Padovano, however, sees only a narrow-minded, rigid interpretation of faith. There is always the movement in Padovano's comments from the early, rigid, naïve Merton to the expansive, embracing, enlightened Merton of later years without, I believe, due

[196] Ibid., 28.

consideration of what Merton sought to convey as a young monk. Is Padovano, perhaps, more invested in Merton's later, more ambiguous, undefined, one might even say, groping thought because it validates his own experience as a Catholic priest who left the priesthood to be married and found himself at odds with what he himself once believed as a young priest?

Merton is celebrated for moving to a more all-embracing mindset, yet I think it is valid to ask just what it is Merton is embracing with an ever-greater obscure and insecure thought? The iconoclasm, the flight from objectivity, and the tendency to dismiss convention for the mere sake of its conventionality all create an environment ready to excuse breaches of commitment and infidelity; activities Merton was indulging in during the 1960's and which many of his biographers view as expressions of growth and freedom. This admiration of Merton's disavowal of convention, authority, dogma or anything that might imply the necessity of commitment says as much about those who are admiring as it does about Merton. Padovano's critique, for instance, that Merton's early writings were naïve and unsophisticated is just as dogmatic as what he is critiquing. This brings up the very valid question as to whether anti-dogmatism and iconoclasm are often used as a smoke screen to obscure the subjective choice to disregard established norms despite their possible objective validity. By labeling Merton's early writings as naïve and describing the actions of his religious superiors as stifling and tyrannical Padovano avoids the necessity of actually explaining the how and why of the matter. There are many experts in sacramental and ecclesial theology who would disagree profoundly with Padovano's assessment of Merton's early writings and the manner in which his superiors dealt with his incessant demands for special treatment - demands that departed

significantly from the constitution of the Cistercian Order that Merton joined and to which he chose to remain of his own free will. Padovano presents a view of Merton, ironically conventional in every respect, that seeks to exalt him on the basis of battles he fought without regard as to whether these battles were in the least bit justified.

Take for instance the issue of Merton's writings being censored by his order and by others in the Church hierarchy. Padovano claims Merton had to live on the edge in order for his writing to be meaningful and to fulfill his "mystic search" for meaning:

> In his early work he had spoken of the "water of bitterness and contradiction." But more tranquil journeys would have destroyed him. He had to live close to the dividing line between homecoming and alienation, between life and death, compliance and disobedience, poetry and prose, East and West, the world and the Church, rules of silence and vows of conversation.
>
> His fear was of confines not of his own choosing. There were no limits when he was writing: books, readers, ideas seemed endless. The exile he feared was not exclusion from the community of his fellow monks. He seldom speaks of community on this level. Nor did he fear exclusion from the Church's approval. The exile he feared was exclusion from writing. He was most deeply disturbed in his life when people put restraints on his writing . . .
>
> Thus, it is not too much to claim, as Merton does, in a letter to Jacques Maritain, the French philosopher, that for him sanctity is "connected with books and with writing." "If I were forbidden to write," he confesses on another occasion, "I would soon land in a mental hospital." . . .
>
> Life, for Merton, is a literary quest. It is also a mystic search for the ultimate Word. Paradoxically, such a journey requires profound silence. Writing is a vow of conversation rooted in years of silence. A writer who does not listen well never knows what to say. One enters the silence not to be alone but to learn how to speak.[197]

There are a number of things that are difficult to comprehend in this picture Padovano draws of Merton's writing: his need to live on the border of things, his fear of having his writing restricted, that an inability to write would cause him harm, and that Merton's writing was steeped in and the fruit of silence.

[197] Ibid., 53-54.

Did Merton need to live on the border of things, was this what allowed him to envision things with depth and meaning or were the conflicts and contradictions actually the fruit of fear and evasion that made his life chaotic, impotent, and incoherent? As has been shown in previous chapters and will be examined more closely in the following chapter on Merton's writing per se, Merton was well aware of the contradictions in his life and in his calmest moments viewed them honestly not as fulcrums for vision growth, but as hindrances and pitfalls to his fidelity to the main quest of his life – contemplation. It was these very contradictions and conflicts that undermined his contemplation by filling his life with meaningless drama and distraction. Moreover, he was well aware of this fact, although he was equally adept at justifying it and interpreting it much as Padovano in order to avoid having to commit himself to true solitude and silence.

Padovano continues by maintaining Merton's deepest fear was having his writing restricted as it was his life's blood. This will be addressed fully in the next chapter, but here I will note that Merton's ability to equivocate is never more fully expressed as when he feebly attempts to address the effects of writing upon his spiritual life.

In the above passage from Padovano Merton is quoted as saying, "If I were forbidden to write, I would soon land in a mental hospital." We will never know whether this was an accurate estimation of his own condition or not, but there are many other examples of Merton just as forcefully complaining that writing is what is destroying his vocation and his ability to truly enter the depths of contemplation. I think it is far more likely that this quote from a letter to Maritain is a vivid example of Merton attempting to justify his continuing to write even though he knows it is precisely writing that is undermining his true life's work. He protests here regarding his need to write just as

forcefully as he protested his need for "M," yet, when distanced from her influence and of a more objective state he realizes how truly dishonest, selfish, and evasive was that relationship. In the same way, when reviewing his life in the context of the two vying objectives of contemplation and writing he realizes clearly the destructive force writing has exerted upon him. To characterize writing as the central conduit to Merton's enlightenment is to play into his own self-deception and obsessive drive to justify what he knows to be his own bane. Not merely during his early years as a monk, but throughout Merton's entire monastic life he complains that writing is undermining his vocation. He does indeed realize his obsession with writing, but when he is most honest with himself he recognizes it as the obstacle it is to his true growth because beyond all else it is what feeds his insatiable ego.

Finally, Padovano's claim that Merton's writing was steeped in solitude and silence is simply not tenable on any level. It is doubtful, in fact, that Merton actually lived, to any meaningful degree, a true solitary or silent life. Even when he did spend days at a time in his hermitage his mind was obsessively occupied with distractions and evasions from the physical solitude and silence in which he was living. That is when he truly had physical solitude and silence; it is no secret that Merton attempted to fill his days, even his time at the hermitage, with endless visitors, correspondence, and other distractions. There was always a new language to learn, always a new hobby to take up, always a new hallow to explore, always something, anything, to keep him from the one thing necessary: sit still and be quiet. As we will see when addressing Merton's forage into Zen, sitting still was not something he ever mastered or even really attempted on a serious level. The true solitude and silence Merton wrote about with such eloquence was

something as foreign to him as the Carthusian and Camaldolese hermitages he so vividly idealized without ever having spent a single night in such a place. It is far more likely that the ground of Merton's writings was not solitude and silence, but the driving impulse to escape such solitude and silence, the fruit of evasion and distraction.

Padovano makes a great effort at idealizing the life of Merton as a great struggle toward enlightenment during which he battled the opposing forces of Church and structure, but it is difficult to lend credence to his thesis when one actually reads Merton's own thoughts as he expressed them through the years. In these very thoughts recorded in his journals Merton himself disagrees with Padovano and freely acknowledges he knows very little about silence or contemplation, that his life has not been a quest for solitude and silence, but a rather frenzied evasion from these things. Yet, the myth of Merton as a mystic, saint, sojourner in the land of truth in the midst of oppression, is extremely appealing to Padovano and one wonders why he feels compelled to present such a vision of the man. Padovano's picture of Merton may reflect more of his own journey within the Church than an objective view of Thomas Merton. Padovano's highly subjective view of Merton is another example of hagiography in motion; the creation of a myth in one's own image to serve as a *deus ex machina* in justifying and making sense of one's own life.

Shannon and the Saint for Our Time

William Shannon is less shy about his hagiographical efforts in his book *Silent Lamp: The Story of Thomas Merton*. On the first page of his introduction Shannon proclaims his belief that Merton is a saint, and a "saint for our time."[198] Shannon writes:

> At various Merton conferences, I have often been asked: "Will Thomas Merton be declared a saint? Will he be canonized?" If the question refers to the juridical process for formal canonization, I think not. If, however, it refers to the way in which people "made saints" in the earliest Christian times – namely, by acclamation – such a process may already be happening in the case of Thomas Merton. Many people in different parts of the world look to his story and his writings for the insight and wisdom that they believe will help them to move their own lives in the direction of love and grace are calling them to take.[199]

One can at least know that reading Shannon's book will not be an objective affair. He is arguing that Merton is a "Silent Lamp" for our times and has much to offer the contemporary person in the way of enlightenment.

Shannon, like many others, underscores the last years of Merton's life as particularly exemplary in demonstrating the enlightened person:

> The year 1965 marked a decisive change in Merton's life. In August of that year he finally became a "full-time" hermit living in the woods about a mile away from the monastery. But this change of place symbolized a deep inner change. Writing *The Way of Chuang Tzu* was not just a literary milestone in Merton's life; it was an articulation of his spiritual growth. It was an affirmation of where he was on the spiritual journey, a sign that he was moving toward a

[198] William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Storey* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 1. Shannon writes about a talk on the subject of "saints for our time" that he gave at Clare College, Cambridge in which he identified Merton as being an example.

[199] Ibid., 3.

> spirituality that would be truly catholic in the sense of all-embracing and even, as far as possible transcultural.[200]

Is there any evidence that Merton was undergoing any spiritual growth at this time? What does Shannon mean by an "all-embracing," "transcultural" spirituality. Is there any evidence that Merton seriously engaged in any of the spiritual practices of other cultures or was his participation in them limited to writing about them and attempting to identify himself with them?

This is a common theme about Merton; that he attempted to unite in himself East and West, past and present; that he was the "universal man." It is a theme Merton consciously articulated and promoted. He desired to be remembered as such an individual and believed it was his calling to be such an individual. Desiring something and actually achieving it are very different things, however. First of all, let us look at Merton's purported spiritual growth during the years when he lived as a "full-time" hermit. After, we will return to the subject of Merton, the "universal man."

Shannon's purpose in writing *Silent Lamp* was to offer a "reflective biography" to show a "unity and harmony" to Merton's life, to show "the evolution of Merton's spirituality," to "put the picture in the frame."[201] Shannon's vision of Merton is of one moving from a naïve, simplistic, arrogant understanding of Christianity to one of sophistication, maturity, and humility. He writes:

---

[200] Ibid., 4-5.

[201] Ibid., 7.

> As Merton gradually matured in the faith, he began to see that faith was not a ready-made answer to all the questions that human existence can pose. Rather it was a place to stand: a place from which one could examine the questions and be content to live with them as long as might be needed . . . But this mentality would come later. Thomas Merton of the 1940's was quite content with the Tridentine shell that served as a protective covering shielding Catholics from any need to ask questions or to think for themselves.[202]

It strikes me as amazing that Shannon could characterize Merton's Catholicism in the 1940's as a "Tridentine shell" since his conversion and early monastic experience was founded on reading such authors as the Desert Fathers, the Fathers of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, Etienne Gilson, and Jacques Maritain – none of whom had anything to do with the Council of Trent or reflected its defensive posture. The authors who inspired Merton's interest in Catholicism were philosophers and theologians absolutely dedicated to the scholastic maxim of "fides quaerens intellectum," *faith seeking understanding*. The Fathers of the Church and the desert and scholastic theologians wrote in an atmosphere free from coercion and open to the thought of other people. They were famous for utilizing any system of thought that allowed them to express the Gospel to their particular age. The scholastic age, in fact, was so fruitful and progressive due in large part to its openness to new discoveries and ways of thought. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, was as versed in the works of such individuals as Aristotle, Plotinus, Maimonides, Avicenna, and Averroes as he was in St. Augustine, Dionysius, and St. Bernard.

As for the twentieth-century Catholic authors with whom Merton was familiar, they as well reflected little or nothing of the supposed fearful, defensive attitude to which

[202] Ibid., 22.

Shannon refers. What Shannon is attempting to do here, it seems to me, is equivocate certainty with immaturity and fear, as though for the simple reason that someone has come to realize a certain truth about life this makes the individual *de facto* closed-minded and reactionary, as though a mathematician who holds firmly to the proposition that the interior angles of any triangle always equal 180 degrees has for that very reason closed himself off from the endless possibilities that might arise if this proposition were consistently held in question. It is true that Merton held theological positions with much greater certainty in the 1940's than he did in the 1960's, but it doesn't follow that he did so because he was naïve or fearful. It could indeed be just the *opposite*. His later hesitancy to recognize any certainty may just as well signal a fear of commitment and the change such commitment would entail. I believe this was, in fact, the case with Merton not only in respect to his theology, but with respect to his introspection and self-conceptualization as well.

From the time Merton entered Gethsemani he is seeking to overcome his "false self," and conform himself to the will of God. This continues to be his stated goal throughout his monastic career. The main obstacles to this goal Merton identifies are his ambition, narcissism, and rebelliousness. In particular, Merton identifies writing as a major problem inhibiting a state of solitude and silence in which contemplation could grow and simultaneously fueling his pride and ego. These are not characteristics he recognizes for a time and works through, but they are major forces at work in the depths of his character that persist throughout his life from beginning to end and which he never comes close to addressing. I have stated that I believe Shannon's portrayal of Merton as naïve and fearful in his early years as being inaccurate and that perhaps the exact

opposite is true. From reading Merton's works, including his journals, it occurs to me that, if anything, the progression of his life was not from defensiveness and fear to openness and courage, but from optimistic commitment at the time of his novitiate to one of fear, evasion, and ever-growing arrogance in the late 1960's as he frantically sought to evade his conformity to Christ through the annihilation of self that his original commitment sought to achieve.

The open-mindedness Shannon and others make so much of appears in my estimation to be a smokescreen hiding Merton's fear of commitment, fear of entering into the passion of Christ true contemplation entails. His desire for fame and recognition overwhelmed his initial monastic love and drove him to cling to writing rather than the solitude and silence so conducive to prayer.

Moreover, Merton never made use of the solitude and silence he so adamantly demanded as necessary for his contemplative vocation. The more concessions were made to accommodate Merton's desire for solitude and silence the more he used his new privileges for writing and communicating with others through correspondence, but also by having numerous visitors to his "hermitage" and by making frequent excursions into town. In April of 1968 when he is supposedly at the height of his "integration" Merton writes:

> All of which brings up the problem of solitude: I don't have it here. I am not really living as a hermit. I see too many people, have too much active work to do, the place is too noisy, too accessible. People are always coming up here, and I have been too slack about granting visits, interviews, etc., going to town too often, socializing, drinking, and all that. All I have is a certain privacy, but real solitude is less and less possible here. Everyone now knows where the hermitage is and in

> May I am going to the convent of the Redwoods in California. Once I start traveling around, what hope will there be?[203]

Based on his own decisions and choices there appears to have been little hope of Merton ever finding true solitude. This was not due to the tyranny of his abbot or the stupidity of his brother monks upon which he blames so many of his problems, but to his own inability or unwillingness to control himself. He complains that his hermitage affords him no solitude, but what place could afford him solitude as long as he continued to invite people and sought excuses to leave his cell? Just two weeks before he wrote this entry he commented on an episode that involved four young girls he had invited to his hermitage to tape an interview:

> It turned out Freddy Hicks was outside with a couple of shaggy boys cutting up and removing the pine trees that came down in the storm the other day. So chainsaws were on the tape, too, but not too loud I think. As we made the tape we drank beer. Sue S., the girl who was promoting most of it, was very intense, asked a lot of leading questions on fashionable topics – pre-marital sex, etc. And we finished the tape in good style and decided to go over to Bardstown to Hawk's place [Hawk Roger's restaurant] for steaks, and I got a bottle of bourbon and we made a night of it. In the end I took them over to Thompson Willett's and we drank some more whiskey. By the time we were going home Sue was drunk and lit into me hysterically for agreeing (politely – in order not to argue) with T.W.'s conservative opinions . . .
>
> Then the girls drove off to St. Louis in the rain and I came back to the hermitage, prepared a conference for the novices on Cassian and went down to give it.
>
> But I remained upset about Sue, her attack, her neurosis, her mini-skirt, buxomness, etc., etc. Obviously the two of us could get in a lot of trouble and make each other thoroughly miserable. I must take care.[204]

---

[203] Thomas Merton, *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. vol. 7, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey, 1967-1968* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 81.

[204] Ibid., 75-76.

One wonders how an individual could record such an event and then complain that he has no solitude or silence in his life. After reading such passages it is difficult not to conclude that Merton is not only *not* a mystic or fully integrated man, but is seriously delusional, believing himself to be on a true spiritual journey toward enlightenment when his actions point to one who is completely self-absorbed; he even compares his situation at the hermitage to the persecution suffered by Boris Pasternk.[205]

Another consistent indication that Merton was far from the charity-filled model of the fully-integrated man was his incessant criticism and outright ridicule of his brother monks. His journals are littered with off-the-cuff remarks regarding their naiveté, their narrowmindedness or outright stupidity. This following quotation is a typical Merton episode regarding relations with his fellow monks:

> Idiot monastery business. Sunday I announced tersely at my conference that under no circumstances would I accept the job of abbot. Later, perhaps facetiously, I mimeographed a statement, giving various reasons. I thought the touch was light enough, but today I got an irate note from the Prior blowing off steam about it, saying I had insulted the community, was wildly uncharitable, and comparing me to Bernard Shaw (as a satanic monster of pride). Apparently what troubled people most was the sentence where I said I did not want to spend the rest of my life "arguing about trifles with 125 confused and anxiety-ridden monks." This evidently threw a lot of people into tailspins, thereby proving that I was right.
>
> But in a thing like this it is not enough to be "right." The fact is that the community is full of half-sick people, immensely vulnerable, wasting their lives in petty, neurotic machinations – and one simply does not needle such people. It does no good, and encourages their sickness. Also it is perhaps more the fault of the system than their own. I should not have hurt them. Actually, living apart from the "community," I forget what a hornet's nest it really can be. And all

[205] Ibid., 39. Merton writes, "Should I regard my situation as that of Pasternak under Zhdanor and Co. and go on working as best I can with a certain vital protest *inside* of my silence? There is no doubt that it was right and best for Pasternak to *stay* in Russia, even and especially after the Nobel Prize affair." This is a clear indication in my opinion of Merton's tendency to megalomania.

> these people suffer intensely and make each other suffer. I have no business stirring it up and making it worse. The frantic indignation of the Prior was really rather pitiful. Here is a mature and presumably experienced man: and he is so hypersensitive and unbalanced! Furthermore, some people are seriously thinking of him as abbot. God help us if *he* (Anastasius) is elected! It will be even more of a looney bin than it is already.[206]

One gets the impression from the above incident that Merton is acting rather like a drunken husband who comes home to insult his family and then wonders why his wife is up in a tuff about it all. That Merton can be so disassociated from the lives of his brother monks is nothing to wonder about, such disassociated people are common in life. What is truly astounding, however, is that he can be reckoned at this period in his life as a saint by those who are intimately familiar with his life, such as William Shannon and Anthony Padovano. It is as though unjust criticism, misrepresentation, and poor analysis of social concerns are the primary characteristics of sanctity to their minds.

This begs the question of how such a person could be regarded as a "universal man." On numerous occasions Merton expressed the hope of uniting in his own person the various cultures and ways of thought expressed throughout not only space, but time. He wanted to be known as a Catholic monk and Zen master, as a poor peasant and sophisticated academic, as a man intimately acquainted with the riches of the past yet on the cutting edge of modern thought. Did he succeed at this endeavor? It is true Merton was extremely well-read and acquainted with many and varied cultures, religions, political theories, and other aspects of humanity. The question is; did he ever succeed in thriving in any human community with actual real-life people? The answer appears to be no. From the time of his childhood to his last days on earth Merton's relations with those

[206] Ibid., 28-29.

most intimately involved in his life was not merely contentious, but hostile. Contention is not necessarily bad as it can often help people grow to a deeper appreciation of oneself as well as others. What characterized Merton in relation to others, however, was a persistent arrogance, snobbishness, and outright hostility toward anyone who thought differently from him. He instinctively found such individuals to be a threat.

A prime example of such an individual was Dom Fox. Here is a man whom practically everyone familiar with life at Gethsemani in the 1950's and 1960's agrees was a self-less abbot truly concerned for the welfare of those in his charge and who, furthermore, was particularly and in a manner indifferent to how others considered him, concerned with the spiritual good of Thomas Merton. Yet from the time James Fox became abbot Merton had virtually nothing good to say of the man, and when he did note some good quality he always qualified it as an aberration or the result of some other fault such as a desire to be liked or to sheer ignorance. One could argue, I think, quite successfully that were it not for Dom Fox Merton's life would have ended in enormous scandal and disaster. It is no mere coincidence that within months of Dom Fox's resignation as abbot Merton was found dead under suspicious circumstances. Rather than an example of a universal man, Merton epitomized more than anything, it seems to me, what he decried so passionately – the alienated man.

Bragan and the Making of a Saint

The final hagiographer I'd like to consider briefly is Kenneth Bragan, a British psychiatrist interested in what accounted for what he perceived as a profound transformation in Merton from an emotionally unstable individual to one who had

experienced the most profound depths of human existence. Bragan summarized his investigation into Merton's life as follows:

> The accepted psychological view is that a stable, emotionally nourishing childhood is the basis of personal strength; yet this was something that was outstandingly lacking in Merton's life. Life had given him very little. So the question as to what was the source of his ultimate strength was clearly raised, which made me want to explore the spiritual side of his life to see if answers could be found there. The basic question could be put as, how could someone who began adult life in a state of extreme spiritual abjection end up becoming an acknowledged spiritual master?[207]

Bragan suggests that Merton needed to escape the world "using religious symbols and 'selfobject' experience in order gain the necessary support to begin his spiritual journey, but once he was firmly established on the spiritual path he needed to return to the world for the spiritual dimension to come to the fore and firmly establish itself in his life. Bragan writes:

> Although he remained a priest, and remained in the monastery with only very brief glimpses of the outside world, it was in the move back into the world that the spiritual dimension of his life came to the fore, and herein lies a paradox. He apparently needed to leave the world to be 'healed' and to find God, but then needed to return to the world to live the life of the spirit as he had come to understand it. Probably by this time, Christian doctrine was not so important to him. Certainly, he had broadened his base well beyond Christianity.[208]

---

[207] Kenneth Bragan, *The Making of a Saint: A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton* (Durham: Strategic Book Group, 2011), xiv.

[208] Ibid., xxv.

Bragan's book is an example of an individual working with a certain expertise, perhaps, in one field (psychiatry) operating in a field quite foreign to his competency. The goals of psychiatry and spirituality, while they may have certain common interests, are essentially unrelated. Psychiatry is concerned with the organic dysfunction of the mental capacity of the brain and, in fact, disavows any regard for a true *psyche* or spiritual entity as understood by the ancient Greeks who developed the term. Moreover, Bragan's amazing comment "Probably by this time, Christian doctrine was not so important to him" is enough to indicate Bragan was not familiar with Merton's life, at least not enough to be making such broad assertions regarding his spiritual and psychological development.

Bragan's book *The Making of a Saint* is not an example of hagiography per se as it appears Bragan himself does not adhere to any religious community or doctrine. However, it is a blatant example of eisegesis in which he attempts, first of all, to conform Merton's life to a pre-determined psychological model of development and then derive from this model conclusions about Merton that have no basis in reality, i.e., he was a saint.

Conclusion

Beginning with Grayston's hypothesis that Merton suffered from the spiritual malady of acedia which he overcame and subsequently entered the final stage of his life as a spiritual awakened man, we have seen a variety of interpretations of Merton's life all concluding that he was an example of spiritual enlightenment and fulfillment. The difficulty is that none of these authors present evidence from Merton's own life of his

enlightened or integrated state, but resort rather to examples of his writing to validate their assertions. This is a poor manner of proceeding as it assumes that what an individual says is derived from his own experience. It is as though one were to conclude that a physician writing about a perfect example of physical health is, by the very fact that he writes about it, perfectly healthy.

Merton's own writings provide ample examples of just how distant he was from any measure of, not only spiritual enlightenment, but basic psychological balance. The propensity of writers to portray him as an example of an enlightened individual, a saint, a mystic, etc., must derive, therefore, not from objective evidence, but from a motivation extrinsic to Merton's life.

What I have noticed as a common factor in virtually all these authors is a sublimated hostility toward the Catholic Church, at least in terms of its hierarchy and authority. In a number of instances there also exists personal conflicts between the Catholic Church and the authors. A number of them are priest or monks who have left their ministries or monasteries in favor of marriage. It is apparent that they feel aggrieved by the Catholic Church since they are not allowed to continue in their ministries having rescinded from their vows or their manner of life is otherwise at odds with the moral teaching of the church. They view the Catholic Church as oppressive and tyrannical, much as Merton himself viewed his abbot Dom Fox.

In my view, having read many of these authors and witnessing their common backgrounds, their understanding and presentation of Merton is fashioned and motivated by a desire to vindicate or excuse their own choices to abandon what they view as unjust conventions of the Catholic Church. For the most part this involves clerical celibacy,

although other issues such as the denial of ordination to women and the church's condemnation of contraception and abortion are also factors shared by most of these authors. Merton's rebellion and conflict with church authority provides them with an opportunity to criticize the church as unreasonable, dogmatic, and authoritarian, thereby assuaging their own consciences for straying from the church themselves. If the conclusion of Merton's life were presented as the unstable, aimless adventure that it was, the validity of his rebellion and conflict would be undermined – as would theirs. Hence the need to portray Merton, despite all the evidence to the contrary as presented in his journals and correspondence, as having ended his days as the fully integrated symbol of the modern saint.

CHAPTER SIX

The Hermit of Times Square

In part one of this dissertation I tried to give a picture of the predominating forces motivating Merton's decisions based upon the various experiences he had as a child and young man. We saw that he exhibited a consistent and pronounced restlessness and rebelliousness that at times interfered with his planned objectives, as in the case of his studies being interrupted at Cambridge, or they were manifested through his brief forays into such things as communism, atheism, and antiauthoritarianism. We saw that it was Merton's tendency to flee from commitment by taking on new interests and allowing himself to be distracted. We then reviewed the works of several authors who wrote about Merton and saw how they all understood Merton to have reached a certain pinnacle of human development or sanctity during his last years, even though the abundance of evidence appears to contradict this completely and to show, rather, that he continued to be quite disturbed and maladjusted emotionally, socially, and spiritually. In this chapter I will cover what I consider to be the two predominant themes in Merton's life that worked as a sort of balance. This balance was not an aid to his spiritual progression, however, but prevented him from moving in any direction, holding him bound to a mediocre life in which none of his proclaimed goals were realized. These "weights" on either side of the balance were writing and solitude.

The Writer

It is difficult to determine how much influence was exerted upon Merton to write during his initial years at Gethsemani. Merton tore up the journal he kept during his novitiate years and consistent entries do not reappear until the Fall of 1946. There are numerous entries in his journals thereafter where he laments that he had to write "under obedience" to his abbot Dom Frederic Dunne. However, such remarks are usually couched in an admittance that the vast majority of his writing was not necessary and was in fact at his own discretion. Immediately before entering Gethsemani he had abandoned his plans of being a writer, however, shortly after entering the monastery it seems his abbot began encouraging him to write. Whether this was initiated by Abbot Dunne or Merton is difficult to say, but it would certainly be in character for Merton to complain of being ordered to write after convincing the abbot what benefits it could produce. It seems apparent, though, that Merton did on numerous occasions and consistently through the years, voice to his abbot, his spiritual director, and confessor that writing was for him a great obstacle to contemplation.[209]

---

[209] Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 450-458. On November 4, 1941 Merton wrote with conviction, "To me, my life means two things: writing and voluntary poverty, both for the love of God." Yet, at the end of November 1941, before Merton even entered Gethsemani he wrote the following, "As to the independence – and writing! Be prepared to give them all up. It seems monstrous this minute, that I should think of my writing as having any particular importance" (11-27-41), "Also he advises me [a Franciscan friar Fr. Philotheus who worked at St. Bonaventure College where Merton was teaching] to be very careful about deciding to be a Trappist. What about my vocation to be a writer? . . . And there will be no more future – not in the world, not in geography, not in travel, not in change, not in variety, conversations, new work, new problems in writing, new friends, none of that: but a far better progress, all interior and quiet! If God only would grant it! If it were only His will" (11-28-41), and again, on December 2, 1941 he wrote, "As for things that have been totally forgotten, or become absurd: questions of the publication of anything I have ever written – books or poems or anything." Merton was certainly aware of the distraction a career in writing could pose to a contemplative monk and appeared

How transparent Merton was being in his journals is not clear, but it appears evident that, at least in the beginning, he was encouraged to write despite his protests. The extent and subject matter of his writing is what is in question. While he was undoubtedly encouraged, or at least permitted to write, he was certainly not under any obligation due to monastic obedience to write as extensively as he did or involve himself in the type of writing in which he was often engaged. He makes numerous entries in his journals expressing frustration at having to write under obedience, but almost always qualifying these protests by noting that he is either free to choose what he writes or free not to write at all if he feels the writing conflicts with his spiritual growth – the very problem he constantly states. Nevertheless, he continues to involve himself in numerous writing projects that he seems perfectly happy to justify. In the following two quotes from December of 1946, for instance, Merton is lamenting that writing is imposing upon his solitude, yet at the same time he is, it appears, trying to convince himself that writing is good, or at least acceptable.

> At work – writing – I am doing a little better. I mean, I am less tied up in it, more peaceful and more detached. Taking one thing at a time and going over it slowly and patiently (if I can ever be said to do *anything* slowly and patiently) and forgetting about the other jobs that have to take their turn. For instance, Jay [James] Laughlin wants two anthologies for New Directions press. I wonder if I will ever be able to do them. If God wills. Meanwhile, for myself, I have only one desire and that is the desire for solitude – to disappear into God, to be submerged in His peace, to be lost in the secret of His Face.[210]

---

willing, at least on the surface, to abandon writing for the contemplative life. Nonetheless, his abrupt change of attitude toward writing from the beginning to the end of November shows how volatile his thinking and convictions could be.

[210] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 31-32.

> Let me keep silence in this world, except in so far as God wills and in the way He wills it. Let me at least disappear into the writing I do. It should mean nothing special to me, nor harm my recollection. The work could be a prayer; its results should not concern me.[211]

It seems he is convinced writing is no good for him, yet he wants desperately to find an excuse to continue. This is the basis of the conflict that embroils his heart and mind his entire monastic life. He is careful to note that his writing is the result of his obedience to his superiors and is something he must endure as a "sacrifice." In this journal entry made just prior to his taking his solemn vows he writes about a meeting he had with Abbot Dunne in which the abbot apparently orders him to write:

> All I can do is seek to enter into the "desert" within me, and beg Him to lead me further into the "interior of the desert." I do not see the way, and I cannot. I beg that the vows I am to make three days from now may mean that. But when I saw Reverend Father yesterday he would not give me permission to stop writing poetry altogether. In fact I went in to see him and started in at once trying to introduce the subject of avoiding too much activity and remaining in solitude and being a contemplative and, before I could get fairly started, he began blocking me all along the line. So at any rate one thing is perfectly clear. Reverend Father is set on my writing books. He says "it must be a prayer," and "must help prayer." But so far as I can see, it isn't and doesn't. However, *qui vos audit me audit* [He who hears you hears me]. I am going to make vows in the middle of this dilemma. To please God, I must write books, and writing books makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible for me to be anything like a contemplative. Making vows in a contemplative order to lead the active life. I suppose this demands many qualifications that I am too dumb and too blind to have thought through or seen.[212]

[211] Ibid., 32.

[212] Ibid., 47.

A few weeks later he reaffirms he is writing under obedience; this time to the Father General of the Cistercian Order:

> For one thing the General is pleased with the notion of my writing poems, although he said he didn't understand them. And he told me very emphatically, in fact it was the most emphatic thing he said and the only thing that really sounded like an official pronouncement, that it was good and even necessary for me to go on writing. He said specialists were needed in the Order – writers, liturgists, canonists, etc. And if I had been trained along a certain line, I should by all means use my craft and anyway it was a matter of obedience. So that settles that, as far as I can see, until I get into different circumstances, if I ever do. In other words it should be clear by now that it is God's will for me to write and write poems and write everything else I am told . . . He told me to go on publishing under the name of Thomas Merton.[213]

It seems apparent that, at the least, Merton was being encouraged to write. Only a few weeks later, however, he lets it slip in a series of entries that within his heart there remains the great desire to write, although, it appears almost as though he does not want to admit it:

> Sometimes I have a great desire to drop all writing, but today I can see that my way to sanctification lies in learning how to write under all the strange conditions imposed by Cistercian life, and in writing carefully and well for the glory of God, denying myself, and checking my haste to get into print.[214]

> I can't give up writing, and everywhere I turn I find the stuff I write is sticking to me like fly-paper, and the gramophone inside me is playing that same old tune "Admiration, admiration – You are my ideal – you are the one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world."[215]

---

[213] Ibid., 55-56.

[214] Ibid., 63.

[215] Ibid., 64.

> And through it all you get this feeling, as Fr. Badin said of Dom Urban, that these superiors were following their own ideas and personal enthusiasms rather than the Holy Spirit, and they wouldn't take advice from anybody . . . It is a big danger in my own life. I grouse and complain about the work I have to do. Secretly I am in it as deep as Dom Urban was in his crazy Third Order and his Indian school. Reverend Father, who is another one, accepts all the wild projects I propose to him and then I say "It is obedience, God wills it," and I go ahead and write a piece of junk . . . [216]

The following month of May, 1947 sees him turning over the very same questions:

> It seems to me that it would be a much cleaner and healthier thing to break off with all this business and bury myself in solitude, absolute poverty, hiddenness, nothingness, to love God alone, giving up all these activities and all this racket of writing. I know I shall never do that altogether. I believe God wants me to write *something*, but to be always up to my neck in censors and contracts and royalties and letters all around the world and reviews and correspondence with my dear readers . . . I don't know . . .
>
> Is there a theological fault in these desires, this interior activity which I cannot help, these continual ideas for books and writing, this continual grasping for intellectual satisfactions and aesthetic joys – the avidity which is my crucifixion? That is not the question. It is all disordered. It chokes grace, dries it up. Stifles prayer. It wounds, darkens, dirties, lacerates my soul.[217]

Five months later it remains the predominant theme occupying his thoughts:

> However, my big struggle is to empty myself of useless projects, useless ideas, and not burden myself with still more that I have got at the same time continuing to complain. Fr. Reinhold wanted me to do some Latin translations (from the new text of the Psalms) and, wanting to refuse, I gave him a partial list

[216] Ibid., 65-66.

[217] Ibid., 70

> of what I have to do, and when I saw it on paper, I was staggered by it. Have I chosen all that myself?[218]
>
> Why don't you finally do something about emptying your memory and imagination: people, places, things, books, ideas for work – forget them, they are unimportant. They are not your vocation.[219]
>
> But now I am again writing *The Waters of Siloe*, and I ask myself why: what is the point of such a book? Why do I write the stupid things I write, since it is more or less up to me what I write?[220]

It is clear at this point that Merton is being as imaginative as possible to create excuses for his continued writing. He has no real excuse, as the vast majority of his writing projects are at his discretion and although he knows he should not be engaged in these projects he continues to do so anyway because "charity demands it" or "he's obligated to his readers" or other vague reasons. In fact, in October of 1947 he received permission from his abbot not to write at all: "Reverend Father gave me permission not to write any more "if it is a burden," but he wants to "reach souls." I won't be in a hurry to write, but I don't seem to have permission just flatly to drop the whole thing."[221] Actually, he does continue to write with as much gusto as ever, which shows the problem is not with his abbot or any other superior, but with his own compulsion to write.

This compulsion to write was strong throughout his first years in the monastery, but things changed dramatically once *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published. It was the book Merton always wanted to write before he entered Gethsemani, the one that

---

[218] Ibid., 122.

[219] Ibid., 123.

[220] Ibid., 126.

[221] Ibid., 128.

would give him fame and fortune, the one that told him he was finally a success. Ironically, he gains this "success" right when he cannot enjoy it. Merton reflects on his predicament:

> Last Wednesday the 7th – anniversary of the departure of the Utah colony last year – I went to Reverend Father just before the afternoon work to see if I couldn't go out into the fields. But he handed me the first copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and told me to look it over. It is a good job of printing, and I skipped through it with the general feeling that it is, with *Thirty Poems*, the only respectable book I have written. And if I had never published anything but the *Mountain* and *Thirty Poems*, I would feel a whole lot cleaner.
>
> . . . And I tell myself, "Look out! Maybe this business is going to turn your whole life upside down for true!"
>
> I caught myself thinking, "If they make it into a movie, will Gary Cooper be the hero?"
>
> . . . Yet the business of being poisoned in spite of yourself by the pleasure you take in your own work! You say you don't want it, and it gets into your blood anyway. You don't taste the dish, but the smell of it goes to your head and corrupts you. You get drunk by sniffing the cork of the bottle . . . Oh God of peace, *tranquillus Deus tranquillans omnia* [the tranquil God who makes all things tranquil], empty my heart and keep me free and let me live in Your will![222]

With the publication success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton's resolve to restrict his writing is washed away. He continues to renew the resolve with consistency and fervor, but to no avail. Writing not only continues to occupy his time, but it becomes ever-increasingly the central focus of his life, even as his protests for greater solitude grow louder and more insistent. Simply reading his thought process as expressed in his journals can be quite perplexing as he appears at every turn to undermine his stated goal of not writing. Quotes from successive years that indicate the persistence of Merton's struggle with writing can be found in Appendix II.

[222] Ibid., 217-219.

The influence this preoccupation with writing exerted upon him was not peculiar to a particular time in his monastic life. It is important to realize that from the time of his early monastic development the tension between his desire to write and his desire to live a pure contemplative life increased steadily through the years.

In reading through his journals, it becomes easy to conclude that this tension was Merton's principal and overarching concern as regards his own spiritual development. On the one hand his desire for solitude and silence fostered a persistent desire to transfer to another more contemplative order such as the Carthusians or Camaldolese or some "experimental" monastery in Latin America. On the other hand, his penchant for fame and recognition drove him to involve himself unceasingly in writing projects and correspondence that undermined his efforts toward contemplation.

As we see from the quotes above, Merton does not hesitate to admit that his obsession with writing as well as his drive to involve himself in just about any project he can think of, is motivated by a great desire for recognition and acclaim. As Robert Daggy observes in his introduction to the fifth volume of Merton' journals, "There is no doubt that Merton continually felt 'smashed' in this period, especially by his efforts to deal with the specters indicating that his writing, his vocation, his solitude were self-indulgent rather than genuine."[223] Merton admits freely that many, if not most, of his writing endeavors were not warranted. They were not motivated by obedience to a directive from his abbot or any other superior. They had little or nothing to do with the spiritual life or contemplation. They were, rather, an expression of his own, often, naïve, and misdirected thought which he felt the need to exert in order to, as he puts it, "be

[223] Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, xii.

there" or to "appear." He wanted to be a hermit, a solitary committed to a life of prayer and contemplation, but he wanted the entire world to know what he was doing and to give its approval, so he could be assured he had "arrived" and was "someone." Michael Mott, his official biographer, notes "In the mid-sixties the eventual preeminence of his identity as a writer was exemplified by the change of his signature upon his manuscripts and correspondence from "Fr. Louis" to "Thomas Merton."[224] Rather than annihilating and being rid of his "self" during the final years of his life, it appears Merton became ever more deeply identified with the image he had fabricated of himself as a mystic, a social warrior, a Zen master, a hermit, the "universal man."

The Solitary

The other end of the balance was Merton's obsession with solitude and silence. I will not provide as much evidence in this section detailing the consistent, obsessive, at times, bizarre drive within Merton for solitude, but will rather provide only a few quotes that exemplify how he felt. Again, this was not a passing obsession that lasted only a time or even an extended period. As with writing, Merton's obsession with solitude persisted from before he entered the monastery to the last days of his life. And as with his stated claim to want to end, or at least curtail his writing, although he claimed to want solitude above all things in order to encounter God in contemplation, every time solitude was offered to him he devised myriad ways to avoid it and fill it with distractions and evasions. Quotes covering a period of years that witness to his consistent desire for solitude and silence can found in Appendix III.

[224] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 491.

As Grayston points out in his book on the "Camaldoli letters," Merton did everything in his power to gain greater solitude during the mid-1950's. Yet, when the opportunity for him to live as a hermit was offered him by his abbot he refused. From 1960 on, as he was gradually given more and more opportunities for solitude, setting him apart from his monastic community, he simultaneously began to abuse this new freedom by visits into town, drinking bouts, swimming parties with women, an increasing number of visitors to his hermitage – culminating in a year-long affair with a young nurse during which he began to make his own rules and pay virtually no attention to his obligations as a monk.

What is very odd is that once Merton was again offered the opportunity to live full-time as a hermit in 1965 he almost immediately began to complain that this was only a ruse on the part of his abbot to keep him "under control" and prevent him from leaving the monastery. For the remainder of his time as a "hermit" Merton continued to complain that the solitude at his hermitage at Gethsemani was insufficient and useless, blaming his abbot for not allowing him to do something "really important" with his life like start his own monastery in Latin America or Alaska. At the same time, however, he complains that the lack of solitude and silence is due to his own choices that he repeatedly makes over and over again throughout the years; choices to create correspondence, receive visitors, make book deals, engage in social activism. There is absolutely no indication that the situation would have been any different no matter where he might have gone had he the opportunity. Without the influence of Dom James to buffer his exploits there seems, in fact, every indication that Merton's monastic vocation would have disintegrated rapidly.

Merton's obsession with writing, fame, acclamation, and his avoidance of the solitude he claimed so much to desire witness to a man who was deeply conflicted and without direction; a man who had in no sense of the term arrived at "final integration," much less a mystic or saint. This is not to say that mystics and saints are devoid of any psychological stress, but in Merton's case his psychological stress expressed itself not in humility and self-annihilation, but in harsh and vindictive criticism and avoidance of his responsibilities toward his monastic community and vocation. Writing was the main and most obvious form of self-obsession and evasion in Merton's life, but there were many others. In this chapter I concentrated on writing because it gives the most definite example of how Merton's life was not directed to contemplation at all, but very much toward self-aggrandizement. Later I will show how this tendency was also manifested in his concern with social justice, monastic renewal, and Zen.

Their pride consisted in the subtlest kind of rebellion against God – that unconscious rebellion which we all should mortally fear, - in which we unthinkingly let our self-will deceive us that it is God's will – and everything our pride demands is right, is the voice of God![225]

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Vocation in Crisis

When I have discussed *The Seven Storey Mountain* with various readers through the years, there is an invariable response that it is the story of a man's religious and moral conversion *culminating* in Merton's entrance upon the monastic life at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey on December 10, 1941. Yet if one reads carefully the final chapter it becomes clear there is unambiguous and deliberately placed evidence that already, even before he had made solemn profession as a monk, Merton was once again becoming lost. Lost not in the "world" this time, but in terms of the direction his vocation was to take. From the very beginning of his monastic experience he was preoccupied in a seemingly futile attempt at harmonizing his life as a contemplative monk and his life as a writer into a complimentary endeavor. Meanwhile, he began to question the very purpose of the monastic life as embodied in the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, and in particular, the manner in which the Rule and Constitutions of that Order were interpreted and lived out at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Furthermore, his discontent moved him to look beyond the walls of his cloister, his monastic order, his Church, even

[225] Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountains*, 441.

his civilization, to discover if there was anything that could satisfy his curiosity. I believe his interest in Eastern religions and Zen were such curiosities to him. Manifestations of a man in crisis.

To be clear, I am not in any way intimating that such interests are unworthy or that such interests could have no value for a Catholic monk. I *am* saying that in this particular case with this particular monk the interest appears to have been shallow.

The crisis was already developing during the years immediately preceding his final profession as a monk (March 19, 1947) in which he began to rethink, not only the meaning and value of the monastic life at his particular monastery, but his personal vocation. This "rethinking" is a complex matter because it is influenced not only by the development of Merton's understanding of monastic life and the expression of that life within his Order, but by the relentless tug of his obsession with writing as well as by his rebellious nature and seeming inability to commit himself to either people or purpose.

From my reading, it appears clear that Merton's constant attraction to solitude, that became idealized in his quest to live an eremitical life, was more a result of an avoidance of his monastic vocation than a desire to attain a purer expression of it. This appears to have been the principal theme of Merton's life: an attraction toward an ideal followed by a frenzied effort to escape commitment to that ideal. This is not to say Merton had no vocation to the solitary life; but that while there may have been a sincere and appropriate attraction to the eremitical life, it was thoroughly confused with a disdain for the cenobitical life at Gethsemani, with his disdain for Dom James, and with his desire for fame and acclaim as a mystical prophet who had risen above the doldrums of

common monastic life; a modern day Elijah or Jonas.[226] Merton's obsession with solitude was always more the result of a desire to escape than to embrace contemplation. This is clear because every opportunity Merton had for solitude he squandered on projects that directly undermined his attempts to lead a contemplative life. This is so true, in fact, that it eventually led Merton do jettison his previous understanding of contemplation that the Catholic Church had taught from the time of the desert fathers on for an entirely new definition of contemplation based on existential philosophy. This is why Merton found himself so attracted to Zen. The peculiar form of Zen he encountered was in many ways an Eastern expression of Western existentialism. This will be discussed in detail further on. To begin with, however, I want to make clear that the vast majority of Merton's later interests were not the result of a deeper awakening or spiritual enlightenment, but rather manifestations of flight from the true inner path demanded of all those committed to the true mystical journey: the path of self-annihilation.

During the period of his conversion to Catholicism in the late 1930's, Merton came to the conclusion that his habit of criticism and cynicism was an attempt at avoiding responsibility for the real issue, the real problem; his personal pride, lust, and quest for fame. He then seeks to address the issue of his personal responsibility for evil in the world by entering the monastic life. When the moment of truth arrived, however, and he had to relinquish these personal demons in order to advance spiritually, he balked and reverted to his previous modus operandi of projection and blame. This time, however, it was not the "world" that was the object of his attack; he was now "out of the world" and

[226] Merton even chose *The Sign of Jonas* as the title for one of his autobiographical sequels to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, thereby associating himself with the reluctant prophet who preached repentance to the Ninevites.

its influence. The new culprit was the monastic life itself as embodied in his Order, his particular monastery, his abbot, and the Catholic Church in general. These criticisms became more vehement as time passed and he distanced himself further from the monastery and a life of contemplation.

To be fair, there was some basis to Merton's criticism. There appears to have been a genuine preoccupation with activity within his monastery and the rule of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance included many aspects which Merton regarded as inconsistent if not antithetical to a life of contemplation. Moreover, the rapid increase in postulants at the monastery in the years following World War II was difficult for the entire community. Dom Frederick Dunne seemed unwilling to turn anyone away and soon monks were sleeping in the hallways and stairwells. The monastery, built to house 70 monks, was nearing 200.

Following Dom Frederick's death and the election of Dom James Fox, who prior to his service in the U.S. Navy had earned a Harvard business degree, the monastery took a more aggressive marketing attitude in order to help finance new foundations. New monasteries were needed to alleviate the crowded conditions at Gethsemane and other Trappist monasteries in the U.S. which Gethsemane had founded. This new bent toward production and marketing brought on greater activity, noise, and distraction as the farming procedures changed from the use of animal and manpower to tractors, cultivators and other giant, noisy machinery – machinery and technology that, in Merton's experience, moved the monks further from nature and the ability to contemplate in the context of a simple agrarian life. It seemed to him life at the monastery was now big business.

His complaint, however, was disingenuous inasmuch as he was guilty of the very things he criticized most; distractions from contemplation resulting from a dogged adherence to the Order's Rule, frenzied activity on the part of the monastery resulting from new farming procedures and marketing of products, and perhaps most vigorously, the unwillingness of Abbot Dom James to, on the one hand, allow him to travel and receive more visitors, and on the other, quite paradoxically, allow him to become a hermit.

As for the Rule demanding too much time in the fulfillment of unnecessary matters, Merton was himself preoccupied with writing that he himself often considered unnecessary and at the very least, questionable as to its appropriateness in relation to contemplation and monastic life in general. The activity at the monastery resulting from new business enterprises was rivaled by Merton's own publication commitments and contracts, none of which he was under strict obedience to undertake. Finally, the complaints about Dom James are the most ironic since the more freedom and opportunity for solitude and silence Merton was given, the more he occupied his time with visitors, escaping the monastery on forays to nearby towns and homes of friends, political activism, and publishing.

None of the issues subject to his complaints prevented Merton from pursuing contemplative prayer. He makes this observation himself rather frequently throughout his journals. Yet he used these issues as an excuse and a vehicle to avoid the very thing he claimed to be championing and to love – contemplation. The degree of negativity and criticism expressed in his journals is astounding considering he himself was the primary

cause of the lack of a contemplative environment owing to his ceaseless frenzied activities involving writing, reading, correspondence, visitors, and publishing.

Given Merton's treatment of Dom James Fox, his blaming his superiors for his obsession with writing, his desire to escape the demands of charity in community life, his narcissistic tendencies and desire for fame, and his failure to live as a hermit, it is reasonable to ask whether his contribution to such issues as Zen, social justice, and monastic reform can be seen as valid. If he showed no scruples in blaming others for his own faults and misrepresenting the facts in order to manipulate others and get his way, I believe it is justified to ask whether his interest in these other areas was generated by self-interest rather than unbiased, objective concern.

There are three parts to this chapter: Merton and contemplation; Merton evading contemplation; Merton and the manifestations of his evasions. In the first part of this chapter I will discuss Merton's initial understanding of contemplation and how it formed the basis of his life as well as his spiritual writings during his first years in the monastery.

In the second part of this chapter I will consider several factors of Merton's own creation that led to his inability to live a contemplative life. I will also examine the validity of his criticisms of the Order, the monastery, and Abbot Dom James in as much as he used these criticisms as an excuse for not being able to practice contemplation. Finally, I will discuss the evolution of a crisis point in Merton's monastic journey that occurred in the mid 1950's that was a catalyst for his ensuing negativity, criticism, and desire for distance from the monastery. I will show that Merton's criticism was not primarily the result of a deep concern for contemplation as much as an escape from the crisis of his personal unwillingness to engage in contemplation.

In the third part of this chapter I will show how Merton's tendency to evade the deep commitment necessary for the contemplative life manifested itself in several areas. First, his interest in social activism, then his interest in monastic renewal, and finally in his interest in Zen.

Merton and Contemplation

Throughout the course of his monastic life Merton recalls the teaching of St. John of the Cross; particularly his doctrine concerning the denudation of the intellect through faith, of the will through charity, and of the memory through hope. Merton repeatedly notes the necessity of following these "counsels" of St. John of the Cross in order to grow as a contemplative. As one can imagine, the exercise of these counsels might pose a great problem for one determined to express and gain a name for himself through writing. To bear out the importance of this dilemma as it was experienced by Merton I will first present a brief outline of the contemplative doctrine he attempted to follow and about which he wrote in the early years of his monastic life.

In the doctrine of St. John of the Cross, the "emptying" of the intellect, will, and memory allows the monk to live "in Christ" through the "obedience of faith" (cf. Romans 1); an absolute surrender of one's existence to the will of God. The intellect is brought into union primarily in respect to its conceptualization of God or any other matter of faith. Since it is not possible to conceptualize God, who possesses no being in relation to human existence or the created world in general, the intellect is left in darkness regarding God's being, which is the object of the will's desire. This void in relation to the intellect's understanding of God is filled through grace with infused contemplation, this

being the work of God alone. This infused contemplation, or knowledge of God as he is, while producing great inner peace and joy, is none-the-less experienced as a "dark night" as it disrupts and nullifies all previous false or limited conceptualizations of the Divine Being. It undermines the very foundation of one's intellectual grasp of God and replaces it with an obscure awareness of *no-thing*; Being itself.

The will, in its turn, is brought into union by surrendering it to one's superior in religious obedience. The obedience is not directed to the superior per se, but in faith to God the Father who is represented by the superior. The will then, is directed "for God" rather than for one's self. The objective is not for the monk to "obey" in terms of a master/servant relationship, but to free the will from all attachments other than the will of God, which is understood and revealed in a practical manner through the demands of one's state in life such as, in the case of a monk, one's abbot, religious superior or the rule of one's order. Obedience produces the paradoxical effect of *libertas* or freedom in so far as God's will is the only avenue to authentic existence.

The activity of the memory, finally, is gradually quelled as one dwells more and more within the obscurity of hope for what "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it so much as entered upon the mind of man." Being freed from habits of the imagination the memory is fixed in hope on God whose Being cannot be imagined as it inheres in *no-thing*, but is simply Being itself without qualification in terms of differentiated phenomena. With the purgation of the intellect, will, and memory there is not a cessation of mental activity, but a radical openness to the light of contemplative knowledge infused by God into the soul without recourse to concepts, images, or any other form of natural mental activity. This is why contemplation is encountered as darkness. It is not a natural

form of knowledge derived from the experience of differentiated beings or the exercise of the intellect. Rather, revealing immediately the transcendent Being of God, contemplation transmits something absolutely unrecognizable and incoherent even though it is evident to the intellect apart from conceptualization through an act of God who creates this divine *supernatural* knowledge directly within the soul. The gradual development of the ability to recognize this new form of knowledge constitutes contemplative awakening. The awakening generally occurs in proportion to the degree to which one's intellect, memory, and will have been purged and surrendered to God alone through faith, hope, and charity.

Less than a month after his entrance into the monastery Merton wrote of what he believed God was asking of him: "Child! First love Me with all your desire, and cast out all other loves – for your body, for your name, for your work, for your health, for your own consolation, *for your own idea of Me* – sacrifice everything. Love my will."[227] This could have come straight from the pages of St. John of the Cross. Yet, upon his entrance into the monastery there soon arose within Merton a dilemma insofar as his writing seemed to conflict with his efforts at disposing himself to contemplation. There was in his writing activity no formal obstacle to a life of contemplation. He had received permission and even the encouragement of his abbot, Dom Frederick Dunne, to write poetry, works on the spiritual life, and even his autobiography (Seven Storey Mountain, pg. 451). Moreover, writing has been for many Christian saints a great source of spiritual growth and often an avenue to contemplation. For Merton, however, writing gradually became a source of continual distraction in his spiritual life. It increasingly

[227] Thomas Merton *Entering the Silence*, 5

presented itself as a great inner conflict in as much as, on the one hand, he loved writing and felt obsessively compelled to write, and on the other he became increasingly convinced that his writing was for the most part an expression of his ego and an escape from a deeper encounter with God. The conflict with writing became acute once Merton earned international fame with the publication of his best-selling autobiography. This event appears to have triggered an unquenchable desire for acclaim within the young monk that directly undermined his efforts at contemplation.

This inner conflict about writing was not something he only occasionally touched upon, but it was a constant theme throughout his monastic life beginning shortly after his novitiate and extending to the end of his life. It was a conflict he was never able to resolve.

The last pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* are dedicated to an examination of this conflict. He writes:

> By this time I should have been delivered of any problems about my true identity. I had already made my simple profession. And my vows should have divested me of the last shreds of any special identity.
>
> But then there was this shadow, this double, this writer who had followed me into the cloister.
>
> He is still on my track. He rides my shoulders, sometimes, like the old man of the sea. I cannot lose him. He still wears the name of Thomas Merton. Is it the name of an enemy?
>
> He is supposed to be dead.
>
> But he stands and meets me in the doorway of all my prayers, and follows me into church. He kneels with me behind the pillar, the Judas, and talks to me all the time in my ear.
>
> He is a business man. He is full of ideas. He breathes notions and new schemes. He generates books in the silence that ought to be sweet with the infinitely productive darkness of contemplation.
>
> And the worst of it is, he has my superiors on his side. They won't kick him out. I can't get rid of him.
>
> Maybe in the end he will kill me, he will drink my blood.

> Nobody seems to understand that one of us has got to die.
>
> Sometimes I am mortally afraid. There are the days when there seems to be nothing left of my vocation – my contemplative vocation – but a few ashes. And everybody calmly tells me: "Writing is your vocation."
>
> And there he stands and bars my way to liberty. I am bound to the earth, in his Egyptian bondage of contracts, reviews, page proofs, and all the plans for books and articles that I am saddled with.[228]

After lamenting that the great increase of vocations to the order and the founding of new monasteries was conducive to his superiors' encouragement of his writing, he continues:

> So then Lax [a close friend of Merton's from his college days at Columbia] came down again for another Christmas, and told me I should be writing more poems. I did not argue about it. But in my own heart I did not think it was God's will. And Dom Vital, my confessor, did not think so either.
>
> Then one day – the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, 1945 – I went to Father Abbot for direction, and without my even thinking of the subject, or mentioning it, he suddenly said to me:
>
> "I want you to go on writing poems."[229]

He then argues the pros and cons of the contemplative life vs. an active apostolate in view of the worth of his own activities. He cites the opinions of Sts. Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, and Bonaventure, but concludes by quoting St. John of the Cross regarding the apostolic value of contemplation:

> Yet if this sublime fire of infused love burns in your soul, it will inevitably send forth throughout the Church and the world an influence more tremendous than could be estimated by the radius reached by words or by example. Saint John of the Cross writes: "A very little of this pure love is more precious in the sight of

[228] Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 448-449.

[229] Ibid., 451.

> God and of greater profit to the Church, even though the soul appear to be doing nothing, than are all other works put together."[230]

He is convinced that he is called to leave behind the activity involved in writing and publishing and to live a life of pure contemplation, but the circumstances don't seem to be leading him in that direction. He protests to God:

> You have got me walking up and down all day under those trees, saying to me over and over again, "Solitude, solitude." And You have turned around and thrown the whole world in my lap. You have told me, "Leave all things and follow me," and then You have tied half of New York to my foot like a ball and chain. You have got me kneeling behind that pillar with my mind making a noise like a bank. Is that contemplation? . . . By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was, or what the contemplative vocation was, or what my vocation was, and what our Cistercian vocation was. In fact I could not be sure I knew or understood much of anything except that I believed that You wanted me to take those particular vows in this particular house on that particular day for reasons best known to Yourself, and that what I was expected to do after that was follow along with the rest and do what I was told and things would begin to become clear.[231]

Things never became clear. In December of the following year (1946) he writes with uncertainty, "Let me at least disappear into the writing I do. It should mean nothing special to me, nor harm my recollection. The work could be a prayer; its results should not concern me."[232] But it did disturb his recollection and it did mean something very important to him. Following the great success of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948 he

---

[230] Ibid., 458.

[231] Ibid., 459-460.

[232] Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 32.

begins to see himself more and more as a writer rather than a monk and to harbor a deep longing for public recognition as a great author. Yet even before that the longing for public recognition is strong and he writes, "I can't give up writing, and everywhere I turn I find the stuff I write is sticking to me like fly-paper, and the gramophone inside me is playing that same old tune "Admiration, admiration – You are my ideal – you are the one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world."[233] (Entering the Silence, pg. 64) This public identity grew steadily greater with each new work as he seemed to have stumbled upon an audience starving for his writing. Yet, the conflict continues. In 1947 he writes:

> [March 9] *Too much activity*. I got permission to ask Reverend Father for permission to give up writing verse. It is a terrific nuisance, and it keeps my mind on myself and on images and ideas. It is a big smokescreen, and chokes the only thing that matters, which is the simple contemplation of God without useless acts. That is what I am made for . . . (Entering the Silence, pg. 42)
>
> [March 16] Reverend Father is set on my writing books. He says, "it must be a prayer," and "must help prayer." But so far as I can see, it isn't and doesn't. . . . I am going to make vows in the middle of this dilemma. To please God, I must write books, and writing books makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for me to be anything like a contemplative. (Entering the Silence, pg. 47)
>
> [April 25] The infinite God has to compete for possession of my mind with the notion of a beautiful typewriter with French accents on it. (Entering the Silence, pg. 66)
>
> [May 23] Holy Spirit, fill me with Your simplicity and teach me to avoid getting myself into useless works by my own blind and impetuous will which Reverend Father always approves. Teach me to ignore the plans and ideas that come to me for new work to be done – or to write them down, as obedience wants me to – and then, I hope, forget them. (Entering the Silence, pg. 77)
>
> [September 28] Why don't you finally do something about emptying your memory and imagination: people, places, things, books, ideas for work – forget

[233] Ibid., 64.

> them, they are unimportant. They are not your vocation. (Entering the Silence, pg. 123)

He cannot put to rest his desire for acclaim as a writer.

In his article *Contemplation in a Rocking Chair* Merton pits the demands of contemplation against the lax, "bourgeois spirit" he saw prevalent in the West at the time. He makes several forceful remarks that characterize his understanding of contemplation and distinguishes it from what he understood at the time to be Eastern meditation practice. Following are several quotes; the first three offer a description of contemplation and the final two describe the pitfalls of the contemplative journey. I believe, whether written intentionally so or not, these final quotes are largely autobiographical and are very telling as to the nature of his interior struggle. In distinguishing Christian contemplation from quietism Merton writes:

> Quietism is not, of course, an exclusively middle-class product. There is a certain instinct for inertia in fallen human nature. We tend of ourselves towards an ideal of rest which excludes all effort and all expense of thought or of desire. This is characteristic of Oriental mysticism which is really not contemplation at all. Since the love of comfort and the hatred of effort are fundamental to the bourgeois spirit it is scarcely surprising that quietism should have taken root in the Europe of the middle class.[234]

The reference to "Oriental mysticism" reveals something of Merton's early understanding of Asian religions. Many Buddhist would indeed agree with Merton that "Oriental mysticism" is not really mysticism. If mysticism is considered to imply a relationship

[234] Merton, Thomas, *Thomas Merton Early Essays, 1947-1952* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville: 2015), 96.

with a supernatural God, it would indeed be foreign to Buddhism which does not seek any reality beyond what is experienced. Merton, here, appears to be implying that "Oriental mysticism" is not true mysticism because it is, in his eyes, an attempt at escape from reality rather than an entry into it. His attitude in this regard will shift dramatically in just a few years, but it is important to note that Merton understands contemplation as reaching for what is beyond nature. His aversion to quietism, laxity, and a contrived, false contemplation is derived from his understanding that the false self must be annihilated in order for the *Imago Dei*, or true nature of the human person, may be revealed. Describing Christian contemplation itself he writes:

> But we cannot understand the vices of the substitute if we know nothing about the genuine article. True contemplation is a gift of God produced in the soul by the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Ghost, especially understanding and wisdom. It is itself nothing else but an experience of God revealing Himself to us in the intimate embrace of a love so pure that it overwhelms every other affection and excludes everything from our souls but the knowledge of Love alone. In the words of St. Bernard, *Qui amat, amat et aliud novit nihil*. The union of the soul with God in contemplation is effected in the depths of a holy darkness in which the intellect is blinded by excess of light and in which the natural powers of man, reduced to incapacity by the actual contact of an object Who is Infinite, are elevated and transported above the human level. In terms of human experience the early stages of contemplation seem like inactivity but that is far from true. On the contrary, the mind and will, blinded by darkness and aridity, are really being lifted to a degree of action that is far superior to anything our nature can comprehend. In fact, human nature has subordinated its function as the principle of these immanent operations and our faculties are now moved directly by God Himself.[235]

[235] Ibid., 96-97. *Qui amat, amat et aliud novit nihil* – "He who loves, loves and knows nothing else."

Merton then, as he often did in this period of his writing, references the teaching of St. John of the Cross:

> So profound and complete and intense is the interior activity of the soul under the direction of God in contemplation that St. John of the Cross does not hesitate to say that it is in mystical union that the soul '*attains to a true fulfillment of the first commandment,*' . . . It is, he says, only in infused contemplation that the energies of the soul are completely united in God without any possibility of wandering away to any other object. It is only in mystical union that it really becomes possible for us literally to concentrate our whole mind and heart and soul and strength upon God . . . In mystical union, and above all in the mystical marriage, we reach the summit of supernatural perfection on earth and attain the end for which we were brought into existence.[236]

Merton then turns to describing the demands of a life of contemplation:

> The way to this life is a path of labor and effort and sacrifice. It means striving to detach ourselves from everything that is not God. It means not only withdrawing from the pleasures and ambitions of the world but even from the highest and most perfect natural activities of the mind and will. To the pure contemplative even the intuitions and reasoning of the metaphysician and the speculative theologian can, under certain circumstances, be a temptation and he must then put them aside as not good enough for him, and keep his eyes fixed on a higher ideal that is baffling because it is incomprehensible. Even the desire for the consolations of prayer and the ardor of sensible love and felt enthusiasm can be an obstacle to the soul's advance to union with God in the cloud of darkness. The way of contemplation demands the most complete and irrevocable sacrifice of everything that human nature could possibly prize and desire. It is a narrow way – so narrow that few are willing to enter upon it, or stay on it when they find out how narrow it actually is.[237]

[236] Ibid., 97. Emphasis his.

[237] Ibid., 97-98.

Finally, Merton offers a vignette of the person who is seeking to escape the demands of the contemplative life:

> You know the type. He is a busy, active person. His imagination works overtime and keeps him jumping from project to project and ambition to ambition. He would like to lead a deep interior life. He has read a lot of books about it and can talk about mystical contemplation with a certain facility. But when it comes to subjecting himself to the long, obscure process of interior mortification and purification that a deep interior life demands, he seizes any excuse to run away. For him activity is a refuge. He flies to it at every possible opportunity, to get away from the specter of that dry darkness in which God would perhaps come too close and make too many demands and begin to strip him of himself and leave him in all his poverty and helplessness and fear.[238]

Beginning with an attack upon quietism, Merton distinguishes for the reader the profound difference between the underlying motivations for the quietist and the contemplative. *Quietus* in Latin refers to more than simply the cessation of the audible, but more accurately to passivity, the "quieting" of all effort. He sees quietism as an escape from desire and effort, all activity of the mind and will, while contemplation involves great, consistent, and long effort not in the rejection of the intellect and will, but in the focusing of intellect and the direction of the will (desire) to God alone. Contemplation involves not inactivity, but the highest form of human activity. It requires the complete and absolute abandonment of all desire that is not immediately directed to God; all ambitions, proclivities, and predilections, even those that are entirely and naturally good if they are not aimed at the immediate encounter with God. It involves not only the cessation of all

[238] Ibid., 100.

desire apart from that of God, but eventually the cessation of all intellectual operations so that one's entire being rests in emptiness and "darkness."

Merton Evading Contemplation

As stated in the introduction, one of Merton's favorite resources in his early monastic years were the *Cautions* of St. John of the Cross.[239] He refers to them on a number of occasions in his journals during the 1940's as the spiritual path he is attempting to follow.[240] It is apparent from many entries in his journals that Merton sincerely struggled with following these *Cautions*. As the years pass, and especially as the atmosphere and tempo of the monastery change following the election of Dom James Fox as abbot, Merton finds it increasingly difficult to make any progress in their regard. Regarding the first caution and affections, Dom Frederic Dunne who was the abbot when Merton entered Gethsemani, always held a special, paternal place in his heart. It was difficult not to compare Dom Fox with his predecessor as the two were very different in temperament and style of management.

The second caution regarding possessions seems at first to have been something Merton was able to embrace. He had left behind a good career as a college professor, and entered a monastery where all things were held in common and no personal possessions

---

[239] Ibid., 50. "For the rest of my religious life I want with God's help to dispose myself for His work in me, to which I am now totally consecrated, by learning to put into effect the *Cautions* and *Counsels* of St. John of the Cross . . . It seems that this is the most effective, detailed, concrete, simple and practical set of rules of procedure I have ever seen. They even go into more fundamental detail that St. Benedict's chapter 'De Zelo Bono' to which they are a kind of compliment although they may *seem* cold and negative."

[240] For example, see journal entries for the following dates: 3-10-1947, 3-13-1947, 5-23-1947, 6-6-1948.

were permitted. There are other ways an individual can be possessive, though. Merton increasingly wanted more solitude than the other monks were allowed, more freedom to write what he pleased without consideration of the needs and objectives of the monastery or the order. He wanted to develop personal relationships and correspondence with various people outside the monastery that were not permitted the other monks. He wanted to travel to give lectures and explore other religions and cultures which his vow of stability prohibited. Rather than use these situations, however, as opportunities to die to self as the *Cautions* counsel, he increasingly interpreted them as infringements upon his rights and injustices on the part of his superiors.

The third caution addresses speaking about fellow monks and gossip. Early on Merton voices his opinions in terms of reflections about their lives, but as time progresses he becomes increasingly overt in his criticisms about both the monastery and particular individuals. This occurs in his journals, his conversations, and eventually in his published writings, although to a lesser and more veiled sense due to their being subject to the orders censors.

The forth caution was one Merton incessantly struggled with from the beginning, although in the early years he consciously sought to observe it. New and unnecessary projects seemed to appear constantly. At first, he would justify these projects as coming under obedience. This was difficult to do, however, since he wasn't under obedience to write anything he believed to be detrimental to his spiritual progress. Later, he resorted more and more to justifying writing projects, meetings, and personal correspondence upon the "demands of justice and charity." This, of course, let the door open to almost any endeavor.

The fifth caution, to look upon one's superiors as God himself, was impossible for Merton when it came to Dom Fox whom he criticized openly in his journals, conversations, and correspondences. In this regard, the seventh counsel was eventually disregarded. Rather than continuing to see the difficulties he experienced as opportunities to grow, as he did in his early years in the monastery, Merton began to view all his difficulties with his superiors as personal attacks against his rights.

Regarding humility, Merton seems to have genuinely desired this virtue all his monastic life. Many of his self-rapprochements in his journals, however, reveal that it was a virtue that continued to elude him. In his most honest moments he was well aware how far he was from humility and how engulfed he was in his desire for fame and recognition. He became a master at rationalizing his projects and endeavors, but would always come back to admitting he was playing games in order to satisfy his ego. This was a trait that persisted his entire monastic life.

The seventh caution is very much related to obedience and was embraced by Merton explicitly during his first years. There are many journal entries where he attempts to accept the decisions of his superiors and the actions and attitudes of his fellow monks as opportunities to be mortified of self. With the change in leadership and the objectives of the monastery Merton found himself increasingly unwilling to consider the trials of community life as opportunities for growth, but again, resorted ever increasingly to engage in blame.

Many writers are fond of pointing out that Merton celebrated Mass nearly every day as a monk, prayed the rosary daily, and was very consistent in fulfilling his duty of praying the psalter, even when outside the monastery. This is certainly true and does

point to a certain consistency, but what is almost always forgotten or downplayed is that from the mid-fifties on he began to engage in a game of seeing how much he could get away with without officially breaking the rule. He engaged in continuous personal correspondence with many individuals with whom he was forbidden to communicate by the rule by having his correspondents label their letters as "conscience matter" so they would not be read by the abbot. He took every opportunity to visit the homes of residents in local towns when this was forbidden by the rule, and once settled in his "hermitage" he began receiving guests, both men and women, without the knowledge or permission of the abbot. It was not so much that he was omitting practices as that he was engaging in many things that the rule prohibited, thus failing to practice the silence and solitude he, ironically, so consistently and urgently requested. Such actions, moreover, were in direct contradiction to his vow of conversion of manners.

Finally, as regards the ninth caution, aesthetics were as natural to Merton as breathing. His artistic temperament found delight in almost all aspects of the monastic life from the Gregorian Chant and the liturgy, to the works of the various spiritual writers, to the beauty of the fields and crops and manual labor. As with so many other things, he attempted in the early years to remain detached from the delight he found in such things. With the passing of years, however, we see him become ever more embittered by the failure of the monks to sing well, the presence of amateur art within the monastery, and the mechanization of the field labor. All these concerns, of course, are valid, however, rather than address them in the proper forum and with the proper individuals, Merton became increasingly outspoken and critical with anyone who disagreed with him concerning these matters. They were not opportunities to practice

humility and detachment, but occasions to exert himself and his will upon the community and to voice his complaints to anyone who would listen.

On June 6, 1948, he wrote, "On the other hand, the importance I seem to want to give prayer in my life is rather of that kind. It is an attachment to my own progress and consolation. It is because I really desire prayer and sanctity, rather than God alone, that I do not advance towards God. Over and over again I have read St. John of the Cross and seemed to understand him and yet the most elementary notions he teaches have failed to sink into my life."[241] A year earlier he had made a conjecture that turned out to be perhaps the most prophetic thing he wrote, "When I get pepped up about the progress of the work, I think I am doing wonders for the Order and I ought to stay. Then I realize how stupid that is, and begin thinking once again of the quiet little cell where I imagine I would belong to God alone. Or would I just be locked up with all the same work and not even able to escape it for a few minutes in the church or outdoors??"[242] Once Merton did enter his hermitage his situation was exactly as he conjectured.

Mott writes, "No writer and no religious authority mean more to Merton in the 1940's than St. John of the Cross, and St. John of the Cross had told those who read his work to darken their memories. Merton wrote the passage down: he could not follow it. His sense of duty to his own history was too strong, to urgent."[243] Given Merton's own critique of himself can one really conclude that his failure to heed the guidance of St. John of the Cross was due to "his sense of duty to his own history"? Is it not plain from

---

[241] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 210.

[242] Ibid., 102.

[243] Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 78.

Merton's own words that it was due to his obsession with writing and the accompanying acclaim?

In the summer of 1955 Merton met with New York psychiatrist Gregory Zilboorg who famously confronted Merton with his delusions of grandeur, saying Merton wanted to be hermit, but in Times Square with neon lights pointing down at him. Many Merton biographers and commenters accuse Zilboorg of being extremely unfair and unjustifiably critical toward Merton. Yet, what Zilboorg says reflects with remarkably clarity what Merton had said about himself, "Admiration, admiration – You are my ideal – you are the one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world." This quote of Merton was not in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but was written in Merton's private journal to which Zilboorg had no access. It seems to me that Zilboorg had a very keen and accurate insight into Merton's real monastic problem.

Merton did not want to be a hermit so much as he wanted to be a star. If he had acknowledged this and worked on overcoming his attraction to fame he could have profited much from this insight. Instead, although he did acknowledge his desire for acclaim from time to time, he quickly minimized its effects upon him or resorted to playing the victim and blaming his spiritual problems on others. In my opinion Zilboorg had it right from the start. That Merton's meeting with Zilboorg caused such an emotional breakdown only indicates the veracity of Zilboorg's remarks. Had they been off course they would never have provoked such a violent reaction from Merton. Zilboorg had rubbed a very sore toe.

Manifestations of Merton's Evasions.

The mid-1950's saw the beginning of a number of changes in Merton that would culminate in an individual who had scarcely anything in common with the man who entered Gethsemani in 1941. There was the movement from contemplative to activist; from Catholic theology to existentialism and Zen; from solitary to socialite. He began at this time to develop a new understanding of contemplation and monasticism which he claimed was necessary for the twentieth century, a contemplation and monasticism directed not to union with Existence, the Transcendent Being, but that claimed encountering existence in the moment is what is essential for contemplation and human fulfillment.

This new understanding allowed him to engage in a contemplation of "reality as it is" that did not conflict with his writing and attachments rather than undergo the purgation incumbent upon traditional Catholic mysticism. In this regard he writes in 1958 about his early poetry:

> The fervor of those days was special and young. It can inspire me to seek a new and different fervor, which is older and deeper. This I must find. But I cannot go back to the earlier fervor or to the asceticism that accompanied it. The new fervor will be rooted not in asceticism but in humanism. What has begun now must grow but must never seek to become spectacular or to attract attention to itself – which is what I unconsciously did in those days, proclaiming that I was a poet and a mystic. Both are probably true, but not deep enough, because then it was too conscious. I have to write and speak not as the individual who has cut himself off from the world and wants the world to know it, but as the person who has lost himself in the service of the vast wisdom of God's plan to reveal Himself in the world and in man.[244]

[244] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 237.

It appears Merton never succeeded in accomplishing this; in February of 1967 he is still well aware of his drive to create a persona for himself in the eyes of the world: "The worst thing is, however, this preoccupation with a *persona*, a constructed professional self. This is the danger. Futility of it. Complete waste."[245] His efforts at writing, however, can now be justified under the rubric of a humanistic contemplation.

The change in Merton's thought can be seen in his essay "Openness and Cloister" written in 1964. In this essay Merton draws a sharp contrast between why people entered the cloister in days past and why they should enter the cloister in the present day. Merton draws a caricature of the past mindset writing:

> They argue that the cloistered life cannot be open in any real sense without ceasing to be cloistered. This seems to them a matter of simple logic. When you embrace the contemplative, cloistered life, you turn your back on the world, you renounce the world, you forget the problems and concerns, you pray for it without needing to know what you are praying for.
>
> You turn away from the world to God because the world is opposed to God. The cloistered ideal then becomes an ideal of "pure contemplation" in which everything is organized in view of a state of perfect recollection: everything is arranged so that one will be entirely purified not only of attachment to the world but even of all interest in it, all concern for it, all memory of it.[246]

Merton admits this is a caricature of how contemplatives thought in the past, yet he needs to paint this caricature because without it his argument for his new mindset does not hold. The fact is the caricature he draws is as far from any Catholic view of the contemplative life as a psychosis. Were there monks or nuns who thought that way? Without a doubt.

---

[245] Merton, *Learning to Love*, 200.

[246] Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 130.

Merton, in fact may have been one of them. Nevertheless, this was never the idea of the contemplative life fostered in any Catholic contemplative order and Merton was well aware of this, which is why he was forced to admit it is a caricature. The reasons given for entering into the contemplative life given by the founders of the Church's religious orders never implied hatred of the world in the sense that the world was evil in a Manichean dualistic view of material reality. There was never any call to devoid oneself of concern for the world in the sense that people were not to be deeply loved as Merton insinuates. The denudation of the intellect, memory, and will in Catholic mystical theology was always intended to open one up to the most radical form of concern and love possible; one in absolute and disinterested union with God's will who *so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:16). The will of the contemplative then is focused on dying to self, in giving himself "for the world" in union with Jesus. It had nothing to do with the self-indulgent caricature Merton portrays in his essay.

It was necessary, however, for Merton to argue from such a caricature. The "old way" of thought necessitated self-annihilation; something Merton grew to realize he was unwilling to undergo. He therefore needed to identify this path of self-annihilation with a grotesque caricature of morbid narcissism that had no concern for others or the events of the world. The flip side of this caricature is one in which the "contemplative" is deeply concerned for the world and for others, whose life is, in fact, enmeshed in such concern. This concern for the world and others allows the contemplative to be thoroughly involved in the world, necessitating, therefore, a radical re-envisioning of monastic life. Monks of

today are "open" to the world and are contemplatives to the degree that their minds are engulfed in the concrete problems and concerns of their fellow human beings.

There are two major problems with this idea of the contemplative life, however. First, it discounts the power and effect of prayer and secondly, its shift to activism often results only in "talk" without real effective change in the condition of the lives of others. Merton addresses the idea of the power of prayer quite often in his later writings, at times, mocking the idea, which was once his own, that monasteries were dynamos of grace for the world. In order to justify redirecting his attention from prayer to "concern for the world" he needed to effectively dismiss the idea of prayer as a valid form of expressing concern and love for the world. What "really" counts now is getting down and dirty with those suffering in the world. Which brings us to the second problem. Those voicing the most concern for the suffering rarely actually joined the suffering in their predicament. Few people actually left there "bourgeois" American lives in order to actually be with the poor and suffering. Those who did were generally members of more conservative religious orders such as Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity, not the more progressive groups advocated by Merton. Merton's own life is evidence of this in that when he had the opportunity to live a committed life of prayer and penance as a hermit, to live a truly poor life in union with those suffering in the world, he chose instead to spend many of his days partying with friends, drinking, "exploring the love of a woman," and engaging in his very bourgeois activity of writing. Moreover, those who God had brought into his life, his own monastic brothers, he tended more and more to ridicule and avoid. His "contemplation" did not move him to involve himself in the

problems and concerns inherent in his own house, but to distance himself from them as far as was possible.

Regarding the new contemplation Merton wrote:

> Today a new and more biblical understanding of the contemplative life is called for: we must see it as a response to the dynamic Word of God in history; we must see it in the light of biblical eschatology. The contemplative finds God not in the embrace of "pure love" alone but in the prophetic ardor of response to the "word of the Lord": not in love considered as essential good but in love that breaks through into the world of sinful men in the fire of judgment and of mercy. The contemplative must see love not only as the highest and purest experience of the human heart transformed by grace, but as God's unfailing fidelity to unfaithful man. The contemplative life is not only Eros (the yearning of the human heart for the vision of beauty), but also Agape (surrender to the inexplicable mercy which comes to us from God entirely on his own terms, in the context of our personal social history). Once this has been said, Eros cannot be excluded. However, it remains always secondary.[247]

This description is very high-sounding, but one must ask "what does it mean" in reality? Is Merton really drawing a dichotomy between a contemplative ideal of the past that was not biblical, not responsive to the Word of God in history, not prophetic, not concerned with or faithful to those in need of mercy with the new contemplative that now exemplifies these ideals? To do so he would have to blind himself to the entire history of Western monasticism, the contemplative orders that in every case developed directly in response to the historical needs of communities and individuals. It seems to me that given Merton's own disregard for his community he may very well have been projecting his own mindset upon the previous monastic tradition. In any case, Merton's call for a new openness in monasticism focusing on social context and prophetic ardor is

[247] Ibid., 133.

predicated upon an invalid representation of monastic thought of the past. In my opinion, given Merton's personal life in relation to his monastic community, his restless temperament and history of acting out, and his tendency to misplace responsibility and blame upon others, Merton's involvement in and presentation of monastic renewal was in large part a manifestation of evasion from his commitment to his own community, his vows of obedience and monastic stability, and the self-annihilation necessary for contemplation within the context of historical monastic pedagogy and praxis.

Finally, as regards Merton's interest in Zen and Eastern religions in general: one of the main attractions for Merton toward these ways of thought was that, in his view, they did not represent a dogmatic context in which to proceed. In this sense Merton understood Zen to be far more "open" than Western Cartesian mindsets obsessed with defining, limiting, and thereby obstructing growth. Merton also found within Zen a new way of encountering existence; viewing God not as something extrinsic to reality, but immediately accessible in the moment. To understand these attractions properly one must see them in light of the form of Zen to which Merton was exposed and which he came to advocate.

People growing up in the West often develop the view that Buddhism and Zen in particular are devoid of the dogmatism and obsession with rule and order so characteristic of the West. There are, however, substantial problems with this view. In many ways Buddhism is just as dogmatic as any Western religion. One only needs to read some of the debates and arguments found in the Abhidhama to realize Buddhist monks can be every bit as dogmatic and argumentative as a thirteenth century Dominican theologian. It would be difficult, moreover, for one to envision any form of Buddhism that did not

insist upon the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, or the Three Jewels as insistently as the Catholic Church maintains the doctrine of the Holy Trinity or the Incarnation. Nevertheless, the idea persists that Eastern thought is far less restricted than Western thought and Merton certainly adhered to this view. Because of this Buddhism, and Zen in particular, appealed to Merton as they seemed to offer him a manner of approaching life that was less restrictive and more in harmony with his need to throw off the shackles of convention.

The other factor, that Zen was not obsessed with rules and authority as Merton perceived his own monastic tradition to be, must also be understood in context. It is true that the form of Zen to which Merton was exposed under the tutelage of D.T. Suzuki was known for its claim to be a posture in which to encounter reality rather than a religion, and in that sense the question of belief and doctrine was irrelevant. As scholars such as Robert Sharf have noted,[248] however, Zen, as presented in the West by Suzuki and others may have as much in common with Western philosophy and existentialism as it does with the religion that first began to prosper in Japan in the twelfth century. The "New Zen" or "American Zen" that developed in Japan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the product of individuals educated not in the traditional Zen monasteries of Japan, but in Western universities under the impetus to be as identified with the West as possible in terms of modernity, yet under the influence of a nationalism that sought to distance itself from the influences of foreign countries and exalt what was unique about Japan. I believe it was these Western, existentialist features of the Zen presented by

[248] See for instance, Robert H. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 1-43, or Robert H. Sharf, "Sanbokyodan Zen and the Way of the New Religions," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 3-4 (1995): 417-458.

Suzuki that appealed to Merton as they, once again, afforded him an approach to life that was uncommitted. I believe it could be argued without too much difficulty that if Merton had attempted to live in a traditional Japanese Zen monastery he would have found it every bit as oppressive and close-minded as what he experienced at Gethsemani. But that was not what he encountered in his discussions with Suzuki. What he encountered was a way of life committed to unfettering the shackles of convention; the very thing Merton needed to justify his derision of monastic conformity and practice.

Zen, as understood by Merton, does provide a path to encountering existence that on some levels shares a view of contemplation very much in conformity with Catholic spirituality. What Merton focused upon in his articulation of Zen was the immediate encounter with reality. Merton understood Zen as offering not a set of beliefs so much as a way of entering the immediacy of existence and overcoming the alienation from reality experienced in human life.

This approach to encountering reality in its immediacy is very much in harmony with Christian scholastic theology, particularly that of St. Thomas Aquinas. St. Thomas taught that God's presence is encountered naturally precisely in the present immediate moment of existence through his power of creation. Since God is not a thing, but Existence itself, there is no "place" or "time" where God can be found. He is encountered, rather, through his power of creation which is immediately bringing creation into existence. Every material and immaterial reality, every thought, action, and event is being created here and now immediately through God's power. God is not "somewhere out there" because he is in reality nowhere, having no physical or temporal being. He is, rather, immediately present through his power.

Becoming conscious of this immediate presence has always been fostered within Catholic spirituality, however, it was understood as a form of natural contemplation which prepared one for the gift of infused contemplation; natural contemplation raising the heart and soul to the encounter with God as manifested in his created works and infused contemplation admitting one to a direct experience of God's own being without relation to creation. Merton understood Zen as a way to foster this natural contemplation of encountering the immediacy of existence. In doing so, however, he tended to avoid or ignore the possibility of contemplating the transcendent Existence of God. Merton doesn't deny the possibility of such contemplation, but the emphasis of his writing appears to stress a more non-dualistic view of spirituality than that found in classical Christian mysticism and theology.

This sway in emphasis allows him to focus concern upon created existence, upon one's own life in the context of the here and now. There is nothing in this that is opposed to classical Christian mysticism, however, the concern is that one may identify created existence as the ultimate focus, whereas in Christian theology the human person finds ultimate fulfillment not in the created world, but in the transcendent Existence of God to which human existence is ordered as its final cause. The teleology of human existence is ultimately transcendent rather than immanent.

What I see occurring in Merton's thought and choices is an appeal to Zen that allows him to engage in a form of natural contemplation that becomes identified with his own ambitions and desires. His own ambitions and desires become validated because they are what is immediate in his experience. The need to die to self is exchanged for a celebration of self that eliminates the tension incumbent upon a teleology of the "other."

Finally, Merton's articulation of Zen intentionally avoids the insurmountable opposition inherent in a number of fundamental Catholic and Zen beliefs, particularly those dealing with soteriology. While the praxis involved in Zen, as understood by Merton, does offer possibilities for fostering an encounter with the immediacy of God's presence, it is difficult to see how the "goal" of Zen could be reconciled with that of Christian faith. Merton's presentation of Zen, insofar as it ignores the underlying philosophical and theological difficulties, tends to present a view of Catholic/Zen possibilities that is unrealistic.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this work I have attempted to make explicit several factors about the character of Thomas Merton in order to point out the possible motives underlying his behavior; particularly his later behavior as regards his participation in the social justice movement, monastic reform, and his involvement in Zen. My premise is that Merton was driven not so much by altruistic, selfless concern for the world or for personal enlightenment as he is virtually always portrayed, but for the assuagement of his need for recognition and acclaim. This motive – the need for acclaim – colors the integrity of his work to such a degree that it is untenable to assume that Merton was presenting an objective, balanced view of social justice, monastic reform, or Zen. This is especially so as Merton himself expresses quite often in his journals that what motivates him is not the desire to love God or his neighbor, but the need for recognition as an authority in the spiritual life and as a writer.

In the first part of this work I showed how Merton's youth and young adulthood was characterized by the tendency to restlessness, rebelliousness, and evasion from commitment. In the second part I showed how these tendencies continued through Merton's years in the monastery, albeit in a different form. In the third part I showed how Merton's life was not a progression toward ever deeper spiritual awakening, but represented a consistent stagnation in self-obsession that prevented him from committing himself to the process of self-annihilation that the Christian mystical tradition involves.

Further, I showed how Merton's evasion from his spiritual path was manifested in interests that presented a façade of spiritual depth, but which in reality were ways to

justify his lack of commitment to his monastic vows, including his vows of obedience to his abbot and his vow of conversion of manners that called him to the constant process of self-annihilation through obedience to his abbot and commitment to his monastic brothers. These interests included the social justice movement, monastic renewal, and Eastern religious traditions, particularly Zen.

Finally, I showed that Merton's interest in Zen was not an interest in the religious tradition that came to Japan from the Chan tradition in China, but an interest in a Westernized existential presentation of Zen quite foreign to the traditional Zen of Japan, but very compatible with the adverse attitude toward tradition, authority, and doctrinal clarity Merton developed beginning in the late 1940's and which increased through the 1950's and into the 1960's. Indeed, it was with this contempt toward authority and tradition and Merton's deconstruction of the Western spiritual tradition expressed in his later writings which so many have identified. Merton's willingness to break the rules and call all things into question resonated deeply with a culture whose trust in tradition and authority had been shattered by two world wars and the relentless onslaught of modernity throughout the twentieth century.

The context of Merton's personal struggle with his own spiritual tradition, his inability to undergo the self-annihilation of his personal concerns and interests, to undergo the "self-abandonment to divine providence" as manifested in the community life of his monastery, created in Merton the need to justify his evasion from the spiritual path by creating a "new" way, the way of "concern for the world" and "uniting in his own persons all the cultures of the world." Yet, as was pointed out, these concerns appear impotent as Merton's personal attitude and actions toward those with whom he actually

lived bore a definite pronouncement of contempt, derision, and lack actual concern and involvement toward those with whom he lived.

Those within the monastic community to whom Merton felt closest were always those under his charge, his scholastics and later his novices, who were a captive audience for his ideas and were in no position to challenge him. Merton had few if any kind words for professed monks who differed with his thoughts in any way. This was most evident in what even Merton's greatest admirers admit was truly cruel and unjust behavior toward Abbot Fox who strove with great patience to foster Merton's spiritual growth and commitment even when he was attacked for doing so. In this, Merton acted not as the open-minded progressive he is generally portrayed to have been, but as an intolerant tyrant who berated virtually anyone whose views differed from his own.

I have made a strong case against Merton's personal behavior precisely because it is the best witness to the hollowness of his later writings. Merton was a man like any other, who struggled with integrity. Neither I nor anyone else can climb into his mind and see what motivated him to do, say, and write the things he did. The point of this work is certainly not to cast judgment upon him. Rather, I believe it is of importance to consider what Merton wrote within the context of his personal history to serve as an insight to his motivations inasmuch as these motivations colored or distorted his objectivity.

Was the social environment Merton described in his works even close to objective, or was he projecting his own disdain for authority and power onto the world at large? Was his understanding of the problems involved in the renewal of religious life accurate, or was he projecting his subjective situation with his abbot and his own

difficulties onto the Catholic religious situation in general? Was his interpretation and presentation of Zen accurate and useful or did it contain significant difficulties that he failed to address and that made his concern with Zen beguiling, and ultimately unprofitable in terms of understanding "the other"?

It appears to me that Merton's life was not an experience of ever deepening spiritual growth, faith, universality, and selflessness. Rather, it was an experience of, at the least, consistent, if not ever deepening, distraction and evasion from what he believed himself to be called. Merton's enormous literary success gained for him a reputation as a mystic, prophet, Zen master and saint. He used these labels to advance his literary career and prominence among the general religious community. He also used them to justify his continued literary and social activity. While deep down he knew himself to have never really lived the monastic or contemplative vocation, he operated under the pretext that he had a responsibility to continue his writing and social justice activities as a "voice crying out in the wilderness." He also used them to justify his conflict with Abbot Fox, the community at Gethsemane, and the Catholic Church in general.

While his writings carry a great weight of authority, we must question whether that authority is misplaced. The authority Merton enjoyed was based on his supposed personal holiness as the labels attributed to him of mystic, prophet, Zen master, and saint bear out. But as has been shown, it would be difficult to argue he was any of these; at least not in the traditional understanding of their meaning. The labels of "saint" or "prophet" and perhaps to a lesser extent "mystic" bestow upon the bearer an attribution of orthodoxy since the saint or prophet has seen "behind the veil" and is privy to a certain hidden knowledge or insight. The Catholic Church acknowledges this and is extremely

prudential in officially bestowing these titles upon its members. As for the title of Zen master, this acclamation is usually attributed to one who has undergone intense training within a monastic setting, usually for decades or until the transmission of enlightenment is acknowledged as complete by the master. It is not something that is attributed to one who has read a few books on Zen, engaged in a few conversations and exchanged some letters with another individual whose Zen credentials are themselves in question.

Echoing the thought of many within the contemplative community today Ron Dart writes, "Bernard had taught him well, and much of Merton's life was a working out of these insights. First, the contemplative should not retreat from the world into an enclosed and insulated piety. This was not the vision of Bernard and the early Cistercians and it was a distortion of the contemplative vision."[249] Yet, we have seen that this idea of the contemplative life being cut off from the world in some "insulated piety" is an inaccurate and unfair caricature. It was not what was fostered at Gethsemani or any other Catholic monastery that was in the least in touch with the Catholic contemplative tradition. That Merton would portray Gethsemani as fostering such a mindset says far more about Merton's willingness to distort reality in order to win an argument that it does about his concern for the contemplative community. If anyone at Gethsemani was cut off from the world and enveloped in an insulated piety it was Merton himself who rejected his monastic brothers, his abbot, his order and hid himself away in what was more of a bachelor's pad than a hermitage. There, in his own little world he could create his own

[249] Ron Dart, "Thomas Merton: The Contemplative Dilemma," *Clarion Journal of Spirituality and Justice*, February 26, 2008, II, http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/02/thomas-merton-t.html.

boundaries, choose his own paths according to his own predilections and appetites rather than die to himself through the obedience of faith.

The purpose of monasticism is not to be "relevant" to the world, but rather, a "leaven." There is nothing in the macrocosm of the world that is not present in the microcosm of the monastery or, for that matter, the individual. In this regard, Grayston's evaluation of Merton as being afflicted with acedia can be, I think, applied to contemporary Christian monastic culture in general. There is an abiding compulsion toward "leaving the cell" or at least "looking out the window" at what is happening "out there" rather than with what is happening in the present moment of one's personal existence. This, after all, is what justifies the presence of monasteries and the monastic life. To pose a dichotomy between the microcosm of the monastery and the macrocosm of "the world" is to lose sight of the reality that the two systems are really only one and the same, but at different levels of intensity and purpose.

It seems to me Zen is not immune to this false dichotomy. As it is "marketed" in the West, Zen is a sort of tool to which one can refer when needed to cope with life. I recall a remark by Merton who wrote, "I was able to get in some good Zen time today." This, to me, appears completely antithetical to Zen itself. That is, to bracket off Zen from the totality of one's existence to be engaged in as a sort of coping mechanism, to be more at peace, to get a better perspective of things, to serve as a pragmatic tool for functioning more holistically. Once Zen or Christian faith or any other spiritual path is reduced to a pragmatic function its value and true relevance for the world is diminished if not lost altogether.

Merton's influence upon Catholic monasticism in America and in general has been significant. But to what degree was this influence generated by his personal struggles and tendencies to evade monastic responsibilities? Has this influence also effected Zen in America? Was his direction in monastic reform influenced by the "New Zen" and vice versa, were his efforts at monastic reform influenced by the direction of American Zen?

Merton was in no position to renounce his image as an authority on spirituality or political justice or Zen. He had, in a sense, dug a hole out of which he could not climb without causing considerable damage to his Order and Christian spirituality in general. Yet this situation does not excuse those engaged in Merton scholarship from perpetuating his image as a mystic or prophet or "self-actualized" individual. Thomas Moore, author of the popular spiritual book *Care of the Soul*, wrote concerning Merton, "The trick is always to find the spiritual deeply embedded in this world, and to discover our own eternal dimensions in the midst of our foibles, failures, and sometimes neurotic idiosyncrasies. We have no better guide in these things than Merton, and you couldn't ask for a more lively writer." Why, I ask, is Merton a good guide in finding the spiritual deeply embedded in the world? What evidence is there he actually discovered anything particularly spiritual?

To my mind, celebrating Merton as a spiritual master or Zen master is like celebrating a man who spent his entire life attempting to play professional baseball, but who never actually stood on a professional ball field. The man may have loved baseball, written well and profusely about it, and may even have inspired many others to love baseball, but how can he be praised as a great ball player or guide to playing professional

baseball if he never really did it himself? Why would I want as a guide someone who never actually came close to succeeding at the very thing in which he is guiding others? Why then, do so many celebrate Merton as a mystic and prophet and saint when there is nothing indicating he was ever any such thing. Ron Dart writes:

> There is little doubt that at the core and center of Merton's heart and soul a contemplative was longing to be born. Merton's deeper thirst and hunger went beyond the active way, and he sought to reverse centuries of addiction to the *vita active*. The turn to the contemplative way begs a deeper question, though. What does it mean to be a contemplative, what are counterfeits of the contemplative quest, and what is the nature of the mature and integrated contemplative pilgrimage?[250]

Dart implies that Merton somehow exemplified the "nature of the mature and integrated comtemplative," yet there is simply no evidence for this in Merton's personal life. There is no question that Thomas Merton was a profoundly influential spiritual writer during the twentieth century; it is my considered judgment, however, that this influence is not warranted, and his later presentation of both Christian contemplation and Zen are significantly influenced by his desire to escape the rigors inherent in the contemplative journey.

[250] Ibid., I

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arcement, Ephrem. *In the School of the Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015.

Aristotle, *De Poetica*, In *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941).

Bernadicou, S.J., Paul. "The Eastward Turn of Thomas Merton." *Science et Esprit* 34, no. 3 (1982): 351-359.

Biddle, Arthur W. *When Prophecy Still Had A Voice*. The University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, 2001.

Bragan, Kenneth. *The Making of a Saint: A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton*. Durham: Strategic Book Group, 2011.

Clark, Anthony E. "Can You Trust Thomas Merton?" *This Rock*, May, 2008.

Collins, John P. "Where Are We Really Going? Always Home." *Religion and the Arts* 16, no. 1-2 (2012): 78-79.

Conn, Walter E. "Christian Conversion: Developmental and Theological Reflections on Young Thomas Merton." *Perkins Journal* 37, no. 1 (1983): 11-23.

- - -. "Conversion: Merton's Early Experience and Psychology's Interpretation." *Perkins Journal* 37, no. 4 (1984): 10-20.

Crider, Glenn. "Thomas Merton's Contemplation: Rarefied Emblem of Being Human and Living in Mystery." *Cross Currents* 58, no. 4 (2008): 592-607.

De Bary, William Theodore. "Thomas Merton and Confucianism." *First Things*, March, 2011, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/03/thomas-merton-and-confucianism.

Del Prete, Thomas. "Education and Being: A Reflection of Thomas Merton's Life." *Religious Education* 87, no. 3 (Sum 1992): 459-470.

Faricy, Robert. "Thomas Merton: Solitude and the True Self." *Science et Esprit* 31, no. 2 (My-S 1979): 191-198.

Finney, Henry C. "American Zen's 'Japan Connection'; A Critical Case Study of Zen Buddhism's Diffusion to the West." *Sociological Analysis* 52, no. 4 (1991): 379-396.

Fisher Bryant, Jennifer. *Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

Fittipaldi, Silvio E. "Preying Birds: An Examination of Thomas Merton's Zen." *Horizons* 9, no. 1 (Spr 1982): 37-46.

Fitzgerald, Archbishop Michael L. "For the 40th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate." *L'Obsservatore Romano* 16 (November 2005): 4.

Grayston, Donald. *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015.

Ives, Christopher. "Ethical Pitfalls in Imperial Zen and Nashida Philosophy." In *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*, edited by James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, 16-39. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

Kilcourse, George. "Thomas Merton's Inclusive and Engaged Spirituality." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31, no. 1 (Spr 2004): 21-35.

Knitter, Paul F. "Thomas Merton's Eastern Remedy for Christianity's 'Anonymous Dualism.'" *Cross Currents* 31, no. 3 (Fall 1981): 285-295.

Kramp, Joseph. "Merton's Melancholia: Mother, Monasticism, and the Religion of Honor." *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 3 (January 2007): 307-319.

- - -. "Merton's Melancholia: Margie, Monasticism, and the Religion of Hope." *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 4 (Mar 2007): 441-458.

- - -. "The Suicide of Thomas Merton: Moral Narcissism, Contemplative Prayer, and the Religion of Humor." *Pastoral Psychology* 55, no. 5 (May 2007): 619-635.

Labrie, Ross. "Christian Humanism and the Roots of Peace in Thomas Merton." *Renascence* 59, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 295-309.

- - -. "Christianity and Action in Thomas Merton." *Christianity and Literature* 55, no. 4 (Sum 2006): 475- 492.

- - -. "Thomas Merton on Art and Religion in William Faulkner." *Religion & the Arts* 14, no. 4 (Aug 2010): 401-417.

Leonard, Bill J. "Thomas Merton, Spiritual Identity, and Religious Freedom: The Walls of New Freedom." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38, no. 2 (Sum 2011): 195-213.

MacCormick, Chalmers. "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1972): 802-818.

Merton, Thomas. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*. New York: New Directions, 1968.

- - -. *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 1, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 2, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 3, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 4, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 5, *Dancing in the Waters of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 6, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*. New York: Harper Collins, 1997.

- - -. *The Journals of Thomas Merton*. Vol. 7, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*. NewYork: Harper Collins, 1998.

- - -. *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. Vol. 1, *Cassian and the Fathers:*, Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2005.

- - -. *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*. Vol. *3, An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2008.

- - -. *No Man Is an Island*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955.

- - -. *Seeds of Contemplation*. Norfolk: New Directions, 1949.

- - -. *Selected Essays*. Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. New York: MaryKnoll, 2013.

- - -. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1948.

- - -. *Thomas Merton: Early Essays, 1947 – 1952*. Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015.

- - -. *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*. Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013

- - -. *Thoughts in Solitude*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956.

- - -. *The Waters of Siloe*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.

- - -. *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. New York: New Directions, 1965.

- - -. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. New York: New Directions, 1968.

Moses, John. *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014.

Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993.

Nugent, Robert. *Silence Speaks: Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray and Thomas Merton*. New York: Paulist Press, 2011.

Padovano, Anthony T. *The Human Journey, Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1982.

Poks, Malgorzata. "Thomas Merton's Re-Visioning the New World at Intercultural Borders." *Cross Currents* 58, no. 4 (2008): 570-591.

Raab, Joseph Quinn. "Openness and Fidelity: Thomas Merton's Dialogue With D.T. Suzuki, and Self-Transcendence." Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2000.

Reed, Gerard. "Thomas Merton's Concept of Sanctification." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 1983): 90-99.

Rice, Edward. *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1970.

Scheske, Eric J. "Three American Sophmores: the Restlessness of Thomas Merton, J.D. Salinger & Jack Kerouac." *Touchstone Magazine* 13, no. 8 (October 2000), http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=3480

Scruggs, Ryan. "Faith Seeking Understanding: Theological Method in Thomas Merton's Interreligious Dialogue." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 3 (2011): 411-426.

Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. *Nostra Aetate*, In *Vatican II: Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004.

Secretariat for Non-Christians, Vatican City. *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (May 10, 1984), http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/Dialogueandmission1984.pdf.

Seiko, Hirata. "Zen Buddhist Attitudes to War." In *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*, edited by James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, 3-15. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

Sharf, Robert H. "Sanbokyodan Zen and the Way of the New Religions." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22, no. 3-4 (Fall 1995): 417-458.

- - -. "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism." *History of Religions* 33, no. 1 (1993): 1-43.

Shannon, William H. *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Storey*. New York: Crossroad, 1993.

Teahan, John F. "Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton's Life and Writings." *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50, no. 4 (D 1982):521-538.

Twomey, Gerald. ed., *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

Watts, Alan. "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen." *Chicago Review* 42, no. 3 (1996): 49-56.

Wu, John, Jr. "Thomas Merton's Inclusivity and Ecumenism: Silencing the Gong and Cymbals." *Cross Currents* 59, no. 1 (Mr 2009): 28-48.

Zuercher, Suzanne. *The Ground of Love and Truth: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship with the Woman Known as "M"*. Chicago: In Extenso Press, 2014.

APPENDIX I

INSTRUCTIONS AND PRECAUTIONS TO BE CONTINUOUSLY OBSERVED BY THOSEWHO SEEK TO BE TRUE RELIGIOUS AND TO ARRIVE QUICKLY AT GREATPERFECTION

If any religious desires to attain in a short time to holy recollection, spiritual silence, detachment and poverty of spirit - where the peaceful rest of the spirit is enjoyed, and union with God attained; if he desires to be delivered from all the hindrances which created things put in his way, to be defended against all the wiles and illusions of Satan, and to be protected against himself, he must strictly practise the following instructions.

If he will do this, with ordinary attention, without other efforts or other practices, at the same time carefully observing the obligations of his state, he will advance rapidly to great perfection, acquire all virtue and attain unto holy peace.

All the evils to which the soul is subject proceed from the three enemies already mentioned: the world, the devil and the flesh. If we can hide ourselves from these we shall have no combats to fight. The world is less difficult, and the devil more difficult, to understand; but the flesh is the most obstinate of all, and the last to be overcome together with the 'old man'. If we do not conquer the three, we shall never perfectly conquer one; and if we conquer one, we shall also conquer the others in the same proportion.

In order to escape perfectly from the evils which the world inflicts, there are three things to be observed.

FIRST PRECAUTION

The first is, preserve an equal love and an equal forgetfulness of all persons whether relatives or not; withdraw your affections from the former as well as from the latter, yea rather more more from the former, on account of the ties of blood, for the natural affections which people feel for their kindred always subsists. You must mortify this affection if you are to attain to spiritual perfection. Look upon your kindred as strangers, and you will thereby the more completely discharge your duty to them; for by not withdrawing your heart from God on their account, you will fulfil your duties towards them better by not giving to them those affections which are due unto God.

Do not love one person more than another, for if you do you will fall into error. He whom God loves most is the most worthy of love, and you do not know who he is. But if you strive to forget all people alike - as holy recollection requires you to do - you will escape all error, whether great or small. Do not think about them; have nothing to say to them either good or bad. Avoid them as much as you possibly can. If you do not observe this, as things go, you will never become a good religious, you will never attain to holy recollection, nor will you get rid of your imperfections. If you will indulge

yourself here, Satan will in some way or other delude you, or you will delude yourself under the pretence of good or evil.

If you will observe this direction you will be safe; and in no other way can you get rid of imperfections and escape the evils which result to your soul from intercourse with others.

SECOND PRECAUTION

The second precaution against the world relates to temporal goods. If you desire in earnest to escape the evils which worldly goods occasion and restrain your excessive desires, you must hold all personal possession in abhorrence, and cast from you every thought about it. You must not be solicitous about what you eat or drink or wear, or about any created thing whatever: you must not be 'solicitous for tomorrow', but occupy yourself with higher things-with the Kingdom of God, that is fidelity to Him - for all these things, as our Lord says in the Gospel, 'shall be added unto you' (Matthew 6.33). He who takes care of the beasts of the field will not forget you. If you do this you will attain to silence, and have peace in your senses.

THIRD PRECAUTION

The third precaution is most necessary, that you may avoid all evil in your relation with the other religious of the community. Many person from not heeding this have not only lost their peace of mind, but have fallen and fall daily, into great disorders and sin. Be especially careful never to let your mind dwell upon, still less your tongue to speak of, what is passing in the community, its past or present state. Do not speak to any religious in particular, do not discuss their condition or their conversation, or their actions, however grave, either under the cloak of zeal, or of remedying what seems amiss, except only to the one who of right should be spoken to, and then at the fitting time. If you lived among the angels and gave heed to what was going on many things would seem to you not to be good, because you do not understand them.

Take warning from the example of Lot's wife who, because she was disturbed at the destruction of Sodom, turned back to look at it. God punished her for this, and she was 'turned into a pillar of salt' (Genesis 19.26). This teaches you that it is the will of God, even if you were living among devils, you should so live as not to turn back in thought to consider what they are doing, but forget them utterly. You are to keep your soul wholly to God, and not to suffer the thought of this or that to disturb you.

Be sure of this, there is no lack of stumbling blocks in religious houses, because there is no lack of devils who are labouring to throw down the saints. God permits this in order to try them and to prove them, and if you are not on your guard, you will never become a religious, do what you may, neither will you attain to holy detachment and recollection, or avoid loss. If you live otherwise, in spite of your zeal and good intentions, Satan will lay hold of you in one way or another, and indeed you are already sufficiently

in his power, when your soul is allowed such distractions as these. Remember those words of the apostle St James, 'If any man think himself to be religious, not bridling his tongue, this man's religion is vain'. This is applicable to the interior, quite as much as to the exterior, tongue-to thoughts as well as words.

Three precautions necessary to be observed in order to be delivered from the devil in religion.

If you wish to escape from Satan in religion, you must give heed to three things, without which you cannot be in safety from his cunning. In the first place I would have you take this general advice, which you should never forget, namely, that it is the ordinary practice of Satan to deceive those who are going on to perfection by an appearance of good: he does not tempt them by what seems to be evil. He knows that they will scarcely regard that which they know to be wrong. You must therefore continually distrust what seems to be good, and especially when obedience does not intervene. The remedy here is the direction of one whom you ought to consult. Let this then be the FIRST PRECAUTION.

FIRST PRECAUTION

Never set about anything, however good or charitable it may seem, either to yourself or to any other, whether in the community or out of it, except under obedience, unless you are bound to do it by the rule of your order. If you do this you will acquire merit, and be in security. You will be safe against yourself and against evil; you will also avoid evils of which you are ignorant, and of which God will require an account one day. If you do not observe this in little things as well as in great, notwithstanding your apparent progress, Satan will most certainly deceive you little or much. Even if your whole error consist in your not being guided in everything by obedience, you are plainly wrong, because God wills obedience rather than sacrifice (1 Kings 15.22), and the actions of a religious are not his own, but those of obedience, and if he withdraws them from the control of obedience, he will have to give account of them as lost.

SECOND PRECAUTION

The second precaution is a very necessary one, because the devil interferes exceedingly in the matter to which it refers. The observance of it will bring great gain and profit, and the neglect great loss and ruin. Never look upon your superiors, be they who they may, otherwise than if you were looking upon God, because they stand in His place. Keep a careful watch upon yourself in this matter, and do not reflect upon the character, ways or conversations or habits of your superior. If you do, you will injure yourself, and you will change your obedience from divine into human, and you will be influenced by what you see in your superior, and not by the invisible God Whom you should obey in that person. Your obedience will be in vain, or the more barren the more you are troubled by the untowardness, or the more you are pleased by the favour, of your superior. I tell you that a great many religious in the way of perfection are ruined by not looking upon

their superiors as they ought; their obedience is almost worthless in the eyes of God, because influenced by human considerations. Unless you force yourself therefore to be indifferent as to who your superior may be, so far as your private feelings go, you will never be spiritual, neither will you faithfully observe your vows.

THIRD PRECAUTION

The third precaution against Satan is this: strive with all your heart after humility in thought, word and deed, taking more pleasure in others than in yourself, giving way in every thing to others, and doing so as far as you can from a sincere heart. In this way you will overcome evil with good, drive the devil away, and have joy in your heart. Deal thus with those who are less agreeable to you; for be assured, if you do not, you will never have true charity nor make progress in it. Be always more ready to receive instruction from any one than to give it, even to the least of your fellow brethren and sisters.

FIRST PRECAUTION

If you wish to be delivered from the uneasiness and imperfections of which the habits and conversation of the religious may be the occasion, and profit by everything that may happen, you must keep in mind that you entered the community to be mortified and tried, and that all those in authority in it are there, as in truth they are, for that purpose. Some have to mortify you by words, others by deeds, and others by what they think of you; in all this you are to submit yourself, unresisting as a statue to the polisher, the painter and the gilder of it. If you do not, you will never be able to live as you ought with the religious in the monastery; you will not attain to holy peace, nor will you escape from much evil.

SECOND PRECAUTION

Never omit any practices, if they are such as befit you, because they are disagreeable; neither observe them because they are pleasant, unless they be as necessary as those which are not agreeable. Otherwise you will find it impossible to acquire firmness, and conquer your weakness.

THIRD PRECAUTION

In all your spiritual exercises never set your eyes upon the sweetness of them and cling to it, but rather on that in them which is unpleasant and troublesome, and accept it. If you do, you will never destroy self-love, nor acquire the love of God.[251]

[251] Susan Muto *Words of Wisdom for Our World: The Precautions and Counsels of St. John of the Cross* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), 11-17.

APPENDIX II

December 13, 1946

At work – writing – I am doing a little better. I mean, I am less tied up in it, more peaceful and more detached. Taking one thing at a time and going over it slowly and patiently (if I can ever be said to do *anything* slowly and patiently) and forgetting about the other jobs that have to take their turn. For instance, Jay [James] Laughlin wants two anthologies for New Directions press. I wonder if I will ever be able to do them. If God wills. Meanwhile, for myself, I have only one desire and that is the desire for solitude – to disappear into God, to be submerged in His peace, to be lost in the secret of His Face.[252]

June 13, 1948

Because of my greed for books and writing, I have always complicated my life and I have made useless complaints and lamentations, but the same hunger has got me over and over again into the same trouble, and I have loved myself and not You.[253]

January 29, 1949

For my own part, this evening I was thinking, "Maybe I am finished as a writer." Far from disturbing me, it made me glad. Nothing seems so foolish as to go on writing merely because people expect you to write. Not that I have nothing to say, but fame makes me inarticulate . . . Anyway I certainly find it extremely difficult to believe in myself as a poet.[254]

January 18, 1950

Last Saturday, the Feast of St. Hilary, I signed a long term contract with Harcourt Brace for four books – St. Ailred, St. Bernard, *The Cloud and the Fire* and a book on the Mass. I prayed hard over it for three days, especially at the conventual Mass of the day itself which was a Votive Mass of Our Lady. It is all her doing and her business.

I did not expect this legal act to have the effects it did. I put the thing in the mail, completely reconciled to my position and determined to waste no more time turning around and around like a dog before lying down in the corner that

[252] Ibid., 31-32.

[253] Ibid., 211.

[254] Ibid., 273.

has been prepared for me by Providence. That means the final renouncement forever of any dream of a Charterhouse or a hermitage.[255]

March 3, 1951

How weary I am of being a writer. How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice masters. They form our contemplation. They instill into us virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in. You do not get that out of a typewriter.[256]

August 28, 1952

Finished the proofs of *Bread in the Wilderness* Tuesday, concluding in my heart that *The Sign of Jonas* is a better book and that it is perhaps useless for me to write anything more like *Bread*. It seemed to me an impertinence and waste of time to write a book about St. Bernard, as I am supposed to do.

- But don't you love St. Bernard?
- Of course I do. I love him well enough not to write a book about him. Since it is obedience, however, I take it to be somehow necessary for me to find out a new way to write about St. Bernard . . . If obedience thinks it desirable for me to write about St. Bernard, obedience must also make it *possible* for me to do so! Where will I get the time to write anything?[257]

November 6, 1953 (Letter to Dom Anselmo Giabbani, prior general of the Camaldolese Order).

I am very often obliged to *turn down* the often very urgent requests from people who solicit articles from my pen. Consequently if something of mine should appear in a magazine, a number of people will be offended. In consequence, I have stopped writing magazine articles, in principle.[258]

---

[255] Ibid., 400-401. Ironically, his dreams of becoming of Carthusian or Camaldolese hermit haven't even begun to form. In the mid-1950's Merton's desire to be a hermit returned with a vengeance.

[256] Ibid., 450.

[257] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 12. This quote is particularly telling about Merton's mindset as he was under absolutely no obligation of obedience to write this book as the above entry from 1-18-50 clearly shows.

[258] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 79. In a footnote regarding Merton's statement here, Grayston writes, "This comment can only be called hilarious, disingenuous, or self-deluding. Similar statements appear on many occasions in Merton's letters; Merton continued to write articles to the end of his life."

April 25, 1955 (Letter to Giovanni Montini, Archbishop of Milan, later Pope Paul VI).

For my part, I have made a vow to embrace a more solitary and contemplative life (without abandoning the work of writing which I believe to be the manifest will of God). I am firmly determined never to renounce this desire for solitude and to do everything within my power to follow what I believe to be the voice of God.[259]

July 17, 1956

Perhaps the book of life, in the end, is the book of what one has lived and if one has lived nothing, he is not in the book of life. And I have always wanted to write about everything. That does not mean to write a book that *covers* everything – which would be impossible. But a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything. That has its own life. A faithful book. I no longer look at it as a "book."[260]

September 15, 1957

I think it is impractical for me to fly from "every desire" and "every pleasure" that is not explicitly pious or religious. I think that in my own life and in my own experience it has been shown that for me, the pleasure of reading and writing poetry within certain limits "helps me Godward" and refraining from doing this altogether on the pretext that it not [sic] according to the ordinary notion of what a Trappist ought to do – or a contemplative ought to do – does not "help me Godward" or helps me to be a monk or a contemplative.[261]

January 23, 1958

I am struck by a phrase Dom E. used. "When some men are not willing simply to love God, He is content to let them serve Him." It is better to love Him purely and simply than to serve Him by active works. All this I believe. Yet, in the concrete, it seems to me that I have greater peace and am close to God when I am not "trying to be a contemplative" or trying to be anything special, but simply orienting my life fully and completely towards what seems to be required of a man like me at a time like this. I am obscurely convinced that there is a need in the world for something I can provide and that there is a need for me to provide it. True, someone else can do it, God does not need me. But I feel He is asking me to provide it.[262]

---

[259] Ibid., 102. It is amazing that Merton expresses so strongly his belief that it is God's will that he continue writing when he felt so strongly a few years earlier that writing was undermining his contemplation.

[260] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 45.

[261] Ibid., 119.

[262] Ibid., 159.

September 27, 1958

It is a bright afternoon: what am I going to do? I am going to work with my mind and with my pen, while the sky is clear, and while the soft white clouds are small and sharply defined in it. I am not going to bury myself in books and note-taking. I am not going to lose myself in this jungle and come out drunk and bewildered, feeling that bewilderment is a sign that I have done something. I am not going to write as one driven by compulsions – but freely, because I am a writer, and because for me to write is to think and to live and in some degree even to pray.[263]

August 17, 1959

Strongest point: that at Gethsemani I have really found a genuine and unusual balance between my 2 vocations as monk and as writer. And that whereas I feel myself to be prisoner of an artificial role, I am in reality prisoner of a mission.[264]

May 21, 1960

I wonder if the time has come for me *to cease writing for publication*. Before this, the idea has come to me in passing and I have never really taken it seriously. I have not been able to. Now I think it is getting to be possible and necessary. Not to stop writing altogether. On the contrary, to write what I really need to write myself, not what the readers of some magazine would like or what "my readers" expect. But to write better, write less, go deeper, further afield. Think more. Write better – or perhaps not. But to reach further into areas I do not yet know, to write *tentatively* about them in order to begin to understand them better. To write more poetry perhaps – try something creative – not for inordinate publication, not a sermon. To stop telling people what I think. They don't need to know what I think and I do not need them to know it. Not to stop publishing altogether – obviously there are several books waiting to be printed. But do they need to be printed? Or printed *now?* But eventually to cut down on publication. To put more feeling into this Journal which is not for publication. And in which therefore I can speak freely . . . For the rest the best idea at the moment seems to be to *write less*, to write what I need to say to myself and to God, not for the public. And to *withhold publication except in special cases.* Yet I have to consider to what extent I owe a certain amount of writing to the Church. Hard to say. On the whole I feel like going underground, and thus deeper into the Church. Maybe what I write then will be of more lasting value. Avoid the temptation to seek an immediate result. Of course there are *letters* to be written and I could write them better and more thoughtfully. My letters are careless, badly written, without thought, hasty and inaccurate, sometimes having value for their

---

[263] Ibid., 219.

[264] Ibid., 317.

spontaneity, not much more. I still have at least one thing to write, the article on "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism" for *Worship* which I have put off to next week.[265]

July 4, 1960

The trouble is this being a "writer" and one of the most absurd things I have got into is this business of dialogues and retreats. This has to be faced. I can't completely back out now, but certainly no more pushing.[266]

July 19, 1960

Salutary strain and struggle of these days. I realize I have pushed too far in a stupid direction – reading too widely about everything, trying to write too much again, trying to set myself up as an authority on everything in my own imagination.[267]

August 14, 1960

There is no question that the activity of writing and the thinking that goes with it all is for me healthy and productive – because, I suppose, it is my most normal activity. I will probably never fully give up writing, and no doubt I am not meant to. But there is a difference between *writing* and *publishing*. I ought, I think, to do less of both, especially less publishing. Easy to say, now that I have four or five books lined up and ready for the press, contracts signed, etc. Nor are they all good ones, either.[268]

November 14, 1960

Struggling with the question whether I ought to drop writing, or rather publishing – altogether or temporarily. (Excepting of course the books that have been turned over to publisher.) Whatever is decided must be decided on a non-political basis. I.e. not attempting to manipulate superiors one way or another by means of my decisions.[269]

January 19, 1961

The question of writing: definitely it has to be cut down, or changed. Someone accused me of being a "high priest" of creativity. Or at least of

---

[265] Ibid., 392-393.

[266] Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 18.

[267] Ibid., 22

[268] Ibid., 31. Contrast this quote about writing being a healthy activity for him with the quotes from July in which he believes writing has been harmful.

[269] Ibid., 65.

allowing people to regard me as one. This is perhaps true. The sin of *wanting to be a pontiff*, of wanting to be heard, of wanting converts, disciples. Being in a cloister, I thought I did not want this. Of course I did and everyone knows it.[270]

March 7, 1961

Determined to write less, to gradually vanish. Do not know how and do not pretend it is easy. Vanish from popularity into insecurity and anguish of my own decision to be alone, which is dangerous and arbitrary. Yet this must be done. I must begin to do what I must do. Not insisting on it as a preference, which perhaps after all it really is not . . . My motives are mired and confused but the time has come to straighten them out if I can and to "die" as an author, or as a popular and celebrated one. Certainly if people read, really read, my most recent work, my popularity is done with. The last things I will give up writing will be this journal, and notebooks and poems. No more books of piety.[271]

June 27, 1961

Realization that I need to turn a corner, to slough off a skin. Need for moral effort, in the midst of *engourdissement* [growing dull and boring] and confusion. There is probably something sick about the mental numbness and anguish. It is hard to see exactly what is to be left, to be thrown overboard. But once again, at the risk of getting involved in hopeless confusions, I try to face the incomprehensible problem (for me) of writing. Incomprehensible because I am too involved and committed. That is the bad thing. It is so true that I have to continue being a writer that I do not know where to begin to think about not being one. Where to make the divisions. I feel it is useless even to make them, though I know what they are in my own mind. Certainly I can write something, and write, if possible, creatively. But not to *preach*, not to dogmatize, not to be a pseudo-prophet, not to declare my opinions. And yet it is essential to take a moral stand on some points – like atomic war. Am I so far gone that I can't do this without putting a brazier on my head and running about like Solomon Eagle in the London fire?[272]

October 27, 1961

It seems to be necessary and right and then at moments I glimpse all the possibilities of dishonesty and self-deception it brings with it. The creation of another image of myself – fixation on the idea that I am a "writer who has arrived" – which I am. But what does it mean? Arrived where? Void. Has there

---

[270] Ibid., 87.

[271] Ibid., 98. He continued to write numerous "books of piety," for example: *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1962; *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 1966; *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1966; *Contemplative Prayer* 1969; *He Is Risen*, 1975.

[272] Ibid., 133.

been anything else in my life but the construction of this immense illusion? And the guilt that goes with it, what is this? A justification for it, a second illusion? Certainly I can have no peace in this kind of nonsense. My home is elsewhere . . . Absurd contradictions. Where do the books come from? I think of myself as stopping writing, yet two books are coming out this winter, two more sometime in 1962 . . . and there is "just a little typing to do . . ." on this or that.[273]

January 25, 1962

In any case I have worried again about stopping writing, which is confused and absurd. I *cannot* leave this decision to someone else, e.g. Father Abbot, who is in many ways indifferent. I can perhaps withdraw from publication and write only what I deeply need to write. What is that?[274]

May 1, 1962

I regret the time I have wasted here this winter working at books. What moments have been lost – moments of realization, lost in the flux of obsession and work. Statements to show for what?

January 22, 1963

This means first of all letting go of any reputation as a writer and a spiritual man – not that I will not write, but there is no need to go on publishing at the present rate, which is entirely compulsive. I mean, the books on "the spiritual life" especially. With things about peace, etc. it is different, for this is an emergency, yet precisely here I am supposed not to publish. But I should still write certain things at least for private circulation.[275]

June 26, 1963

This may at last be a way to change my way and stop publishing, at least stop publishing such books as that one on Prayer – which I have not had the courage to do so far. It would be so much better if I just wrote what was really in my heart to write. But I find the other things spilling out continually. Of course it is easy to see why . . . This is really a vice. And I suppose I am as attached as the alcoholic to his bottle. Breaking it will not be simple.[276]

September 10, 1963

I can see clearly how much I have failed in this attention where my active life is concerned – especially in my eagerness to publish, to make contacts, to

---

[273] Ibid., 174.

[274] Ibid., 197.

[275] Ibid., 293.

[276] Ibid., 333.

spread messages. How wrong I have been! No matter how good the cause may be, I realize that my own silence and interior life come first, no matter how much anyone may say, no matter how good the results may appear to be.[277]

September 20, 1963

On writing and contacts: I think it important to stick to – poetry, translations of poetry, contacts with poets especially in Latin America – not only [Ernesto] Cardenal, [Pablo Antonio] Cuadra, etc. but especially those like [Cintio] Vitier – also perhaps [Miguel] Grinberg and perhaps even *El Corno Emplumado* [a journal published in Mexico City]. Monastic articles and essays – but not an unlimited number of revisions. My own creative work, whatever that may be.[278]

November 12, 1963

A long, futile round and round peregrination all around nothing – just because I somehow got obsessed with a need to get somewhere and do something (God knows what). In the first place, too much writing, or rather too many useless projects . . . In a word, my ailment is this: I become anxious to keep up with all that is being said and done, and I want in my turn to be "in there" . . . to play my own part, and contribute my own words . . . What a weary, silly mess. When will I learn to go without leaving footprints? A long way from that: I still love recognition and need to preach, so that I will believe in my own message, and believing that, will believe in myself – or at least consent to find myself acceptable for a little while. Absurdity, and very dishonest on top of it. I wish I knew how to be otherwise![279]

April 10, 1964

Trouble brewing with Farrar, Straus, I feel it coming – over the unfortunate situation with *Seeds of Destruction*. I will be glad and relieved to get away from them. Still have to get one more book to them. The manuscript of the Liturgy book is typed and waiting for corrections. I am certainly going to write less, at least less in the way of formal essays and articles, less preaching, perhaps more creatively . . .[280]

---

[277] Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 16.

[278] Ibid., 18.

[279] Ibid., 33.

[280] Ibid., 95.

April 28, 1964

One thing is certain. I am *sick, nauseated* with the purposelessness and futility and excess of my activity. It is my fault for accepting invitations to do and write things.[281]

August 14, 1965

This and the anxiety which tears my gut, and the writing of letters, etc., etc. is certainl a type of a real deep conflict, one I have not yet fully faced – a fear of being without support, substituting papers and books for personal relationships, etc.[282]

March 2, 1966

Writing for instance: for the first time I can see how this can be reduced to a "normal" and non-obsessive role in my life! And I face the prospect with relief and joy. In community, this was only a "worry," abstract and non-negotiable. I was somehow condemned to an evasion which I now see to be futile and self-defeating. Here I think it can become once again fruitful – my work I mean, not the "obsession."[283]

April 8, 1967

It is certainly true that a great deal has gone wrong in my life. Yet I do not know precisely how or where, and I can hardly pin it on any one symptom . . . So too in my writing, my persistent desire to be somebody, which is really so stupid. I know I don't really need it or want it, and yet I keep going after it. Not that I should stop writing or publishing – but I should not let myself be flattered and cajoled into the business, letting myself be used, making statements and declarations, "being there," "appearing." Pictures appear (without any desire of mine, to tell the truth) and I am ashamed of myself. At the root – an attraction for this kind of publicity nevertheless. Or rather, I would like to be known, loved, admired, and yet *not* in this cheap and silly way. But is there any other way? In my case, if I were more serious about remaining unknown I would not be so quick to accept what eventually shames me.[284]

---

[281] Ibid., 100.

[282] Ibid., 280.

[283] Merton, *Learning to Love*, 23.

[284] Ibid., 215.

March 8, 1968

And really I am ready to let the writing go to the dogs if necessary, and to prefer this [solitude and prayer]: which is what I really want and what I am here for.[285]

[285] Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 63.

APPENDIX III

December 3, 1941

No more concern with opinions about worldly ideas, politics, or books: they are knocked out of me: and if I may come to be a Trappist, I hope they are knocked out of me for good![286]

December 13, 1946

I have only one desire and that is the desire for solitude – to disappear into God, to be submerged in his peace, to be lost in the secret of His Face.[287]

August 17, 1947

To me contemplation means solitude and the need to be alone in silence burns me up from day to day.[288]

July 18, 1948

All my desires draw me more and more in that direction. To be little, to be nothing, to rejoice in your imperfections, to be glad that you are not worthy of attention, that you are of no account in the universe. This is the only liberation, the only way to true solitude.[289]

May 1, 1949

Every day I kill Isaac – my beautiful dream about silent, solitary, well ordered life of perfect contemplation and perfect monastic observance, with no intrusion from the world, no publicity, no best-selling books, just God and that nice archaic little Carthusian cell!![290]

January 11, 1950

For the first time in my life I am finding you, O solitude. I can count on the fingers of one hand the few short moments of purity, of neutrality, in which I have found you.[291]

---

[286] Merton, *Run to the Mountains*, 469.

[287] Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 32.

[288] Ibid., 99.

[289] Ibid., 219.

[290] Ibid., 307.

[291] Ibid., 398.

November 29, 1951

But I know what I have discovered: the kind of work I once feared because I thought it would interfere with "solitude" is, in fact, the only true path to solitude. One must be in some sense a hermit before the care of souls can serve to lead one further into the desert. But once God has called you to solitude, everything you touch leads you further into solitude.[292]

December 25, 1952

I am seeking a truly solitary life because of my *misery* and my *poverty*. I especially need to be alone because the apostolic life *is too much for my strength*, and the active life of the coenobium deprives me of a real interior life. If I need solitude, it's because I need to be *nothing*, to disappear, to be completely obscure and forgotten – *tamquam purgamenta huius mundi* ["like the rubbish of the world."] I am fearfully ashamed of the stupid public image which is attached to the name of Thomas Merton![293]

November 6, 1953

Without doubt I am unworthy to be a solitary. But in any case, I am hanging on to my preference for the solitary ideal. I could not do otherwise without losing my connection to the divine grace which desires me to be a hermit in my heart and a cenobite with my body – and to God's will.[294]

February 9, 1955

Although I am not able to become a real solitary, I continue to become one in my heart. I have again asked for formal permission to transfer to a more solitary order, but this permission has been flatly refused by my Father Abbot. I am not without hope about this, but I will have to wait for God's timing.[295]

June 30, 1959

Some of the points that came up today, and are always coming up. The responsibility before God to separate myself from a civilization that is utterly contemptible and false and heading for its own destruction.[296]

---

[292] Ibid., 463.

[293] Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon*, 71-72.

[294] Ibid., 80.

[295] Ibid., 92.

[296] Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 299.

September 24, 1961

There is nothing that makes sense to me or attracts me so much as living in the hermitage.[297]

May 29, 1962

Now I have got to get my life in order at last without desperation and without compromise. A long succession of wasted opportunities. The need for serious spiritual discipline . . . I owe it to the community, which has allowed me opportunities for it, more or less, to forge ahead where they do not go. This is certainly implied by the situation in which I have been placed. I have misused this to a great extent, thinking I was obliged to form a judgment concerning world affairs. That obligation is by no means certain, whereas my obligation to explore "the interior space" is absolutely clear.[298]

June 2, 1964

Today I have faced the fact that even if I could obtain permission to live permanently in the hermitage . . . it would not be the solution it once appeared to be but only "vanity and vexation of spirit." However, all this being true, it also remains true that the hermitage is there and I should make the best use of it, not as an evasion but as a real place of prayer and self-renunciation.[299]

February 24, 1965

Everything about this hermitage simply fills me with joy. There are lots of things that could have been far more perfect one way or the other – ascetically, or "domestically." But it is the place God has given me after so much prayer and longing – but without my deserving it – and it is a delight.[300]

March 2, 1966

There is no question that the solitary life is fraught with problems and "danger," but on the other hand I see that it is necessary for me to meet these precisely as they come to me in solitude . . . At any rate things were never so clear. I see that it is to face what I cannot face that I am in solitude, and everything in my life is affected by the change . . .[301]

---

[297] Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, 164.

[298] Ibid., 221-222.

[299] Ibid., 108.

[300] Ibid., 209.

[301] Merton, *Learning to Love*, 22.

November 18, 1967

I am certainly committed to the solitary life and to "contemplation" and the way I can have these most effectively is here.[302]

[302] Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 13.