

## TWO

### Introducing Thomas Merton

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

—Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

Thomas Merton was the first son of Owen Heathcote Grierson Merton (1887–1931) and Ruth Calvert Jenkins Merton (1887–1921). Of Welsh background, Owen was born in New Zealand. Also of Welsh ancestry, Ruth was born in the U.S. Aspiring artists, Owen and Ruth lived in Paris when they met. Shortly after their marriage, they settled in Prades, a village in the south of France where Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915. In accord with French law, Owen and Ruth registered their newborn baby as a French national.

It was wartime. Holding pacifist convictions, Ruth feared Owen would be conscripted. She suggested relocating to the U.S., which had not yet entered the war. They moved in August 1916. New Zealand did not

yet have its own system of citizenship, so young Thomas traveled on his father's British passport.

These were difficult economic times for the family. The family lived with Ruth's parents Samuel and Martha Jenkins in Douglaston, Long Island, New York. To establish his independence and to earn a living, Owen turned to landscape gardening. He also played the piano at a small movie theater and the organ for a local Episcopal congregation.

On November 2, 1918, just days before the end of the war, Merton's brother John Paul was born. Three years later, on October 3, 1921, Ruth Merton died from stomach cancer. Thomas Merton suffered when as a child of six he learned of this in a note that Ruth wrote to him about her impending death.

Immediately afterwards, Thomas lived in Bermuda with his father and the novelist Evelyn Scott, Owen's lover. John Paul remained in the U.S. with his grandparents. Thomas' non-acceptance of this arrangement contributed to the decision of Owen to return to France in 1925. Owen and Thomas settled in Saint-Antonin-Noble-Val in the Midi-Pyrénées region in southern France. Thomas attended Lycée Ingres, a Protestant boarding school in Montauban a short distance to the west.

In 1928, with John Paul still in the U.S., Owen took his older son with him to England. Merton continued his schooling initially at Ripley Court south of London and then at Oakham east of Leicester. Compared with other private boarding schools, the fees of these schools were modest. Nonetheless, Sam Jenkins set up trusts to provide for the education of his two grandsons. Owen had limited resources and was under treatment for a brain tumor that would prove to be fatal. Owen Merton died on January 18, 1931.

In his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton used an expression from Dante to describe these teen-aged years as the harrowing of hell. This Old English term referred to the triumphant descent of Christ into hell between the time of His crucifixion and His resurrection. Merton had in mind his lack of secure roots or direction in life. In the following passage he speaks of this to the Virgin Mary.

I was not sure where I was going, and I could not see what I would do. . . . [W]hen I thought there was no God and no love and no mercy, you were leading me all the while into the midst of His love and His mercy, and taking me, without my knowing anything about it, to the house that would hide me in the secret of

His Face . . . Glorious Mother of God, shall I ever again distrust you, or your God. . . ?

As you have dealt with me, Lady, deal also with all my millions of brothers who live in the same misery that I knew then: lead them in spite of themselves and guide them by your tremendous influence, O Holy Queen of souls and refuge of sinners, and bring them to your Christ the way you brought me. . . . Show us your Christ, Lady, after this our exile, yes: but show Him to us also now, show Him to us here, while we are still wanderers.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton's sense of being lost and wandering in exile arose in part from a need for a place to call home. Owen's peripatetic lifestyle had had the effect of disconnecting young Thomas from relatives in New Zealand, England, and the U.S. Among his closest relatives were a great uncle and aunt. Ben Pearce and Maud Grierson Pearce lived in England, where Merton was in school from 1928–1934. When Maud died in November 1933, Thomas recalled, "She it was who had presided in a certain sense over my most innocent days. And now I saw those days buried with her in the ground."<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton's maternal grandparents died in 1936 and 1937 followed in 1943 by his brother John Paul and in 1946 by his guardian T. Izod Bennett, MD.

During school breaks, Merton vacationed in Strasbourg (1930); Florence and Rome (1931); Germany (1932); and the U.S. and Rome (1933). During this second visit to Rome, the architecture and mosaics of Byzantine churches caught Merton's attention. However, he kept to himself any stirrings of a religious awakening.

Perhaps because of Thomas Merton's enjoyment of travel, his guardian in Britain, Dr. Bennett, along with his wife Iris Weiss Bennett, encouraged Merton to pursue a career in the British diplomatic service. His Oakham teachers groomed him for an elite university. In the fall of 1933, Merton received a scholarship to Cambridge University and enrolled at Clare College.

Merton's time at Cambridge proved scholastically unremarkable. He partied and womanized. He once confided to a friend that a girlfriend was pregnant and that she was sure Thomas Merton was the father. He also mentioned that lawyers had worked out some legal settlement.

This may have been nothing more than youthful bragging, but there is corroborating evidence. On February 17, 1944, a month before he for-

1. *Seven Storey Mountain* 129–30; hereafter, *SSM*.

2. *Ibid.*, 121.

mally took his monastic vows, Merton provided in his will that most of his assets should go to the monastery. He bequeathed equal shares of one savings account to Dr. Bennett and his widowed sister-in-law. Dr. Bennett's share was "to be paid by him to the person mentioned to him in my letters, if that person can be found."<sup>3</sup> According to Edward Rice, whose friendship with Merton began when both were students at Columbia University in New York City, the woman and her son died in World War II during the London blitz.<sup>4</sup>

In January 1935, Merton moved to the U.S. where he would reside the rest of his life. He enrolled at Columbia University. He joined but quickly abandoned a student organization connected with the Communist Party in the U.S. In 1938, Merton received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature and began graduate work in this area. He wrote a Master's thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation." On February 22, 1939, he received the Master of Arts degree.

After a vacation trip to Bermuda, Merton plunged into a doctoral program in English at Columbia University. He intended to write a dissertation on Gerard Manly Hopkins. He taught English composition in Columbia University's extension program. He published book reviews in New York City newspapers and drafted several novels.

In a collection of essays of people who had studied and taught at Columbia University, Merton recalled his experience as a student and teacher there. Merton stressed that the purpose of education is to help students to discover themselves, to recognize themselves, to move beyond their superficial selves, and to claim selfhood in freedom.

The purpose of education is to show a person how to define himself authentically and spontaneously in relation to his world—not to impose a prefabricated definition of the world, still less an arbitrary definition of the individual himself. The world is made up of people who are fully alive in it: that is, people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it. The world is, therefore, more real in proportion as people are able to be more fully and more humanly alive; that is to say, better able to make a lucid and conscious use of their freedom. Basically, this freedom must consist first of all in

3. Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 83–84, 90; *School of Charity*, 8, hereafter SC.

4. Rice, *Man in the Sycamore Tree*, 22–23.

the capacity to choose their own lives, to find themselves on the deepest possible level.<sup>5</sup>

Merton likened the university to a monastery. Both could be in conflict, but Merton saw each as a microcosm of paradise. For Merton, each had its own sphere, the university intellectual knowledge and the monastery mystical knowledge. Through each, one arrived at a consciousness and a wholeness that transcend all division and all separation.

Merton grounded his teaching in the experience of students rather than in abstractions or rules. In 1939, he told his friend Robert Lax that he enjoyed his class. "It is interesting and instructive to teach a class: it is not true that any of them are crazy at all, but nor is it true that many of them can write English. Also it is true that they are beginning to write better than before once they can write about their families and their summer vacations . . ." Later, he reported, "I lost my section of English composition, and they were going to give me a class teaching spelling to old ladies instead, and I declined, saying no thanks for the offer of that stupid spelling class."<sup>6</sup>

Merton's lack of geographic roots in his life paralleled the absence of a secure spiritual home. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton mentioned his baptism as an infant. He did not think there was any power in the waters of the baptism that he received in Prades "to untwist the warping of my essential freedom, or loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul."<sup>7</sup> If Merton received the sacrament of baptism, it would have been in the Anglican tradition of his father.

Thomas Merton's mother Ruth related to the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. On occasion, Thomas accompanied her to Meetings for Worship. Merton recalled the experience as having been "about as supernatural as a Montgomery Ward catalogue,"<sup>8</sup> he had no enduring interest in the denomination. Yet through the silent worship, antiwar convictions, and body of spiritual teaching of the Quakers, Ruth's religious influence on him was considerable.

5. Merton, "Learning to Live," as published in *Love and Living*, 3.

6. Del Prete, "Teaching Is Candy," 158.

7. SSM, 5. In an email dated April 12, 2010, Paul M. Pearson of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University writes that he has never seen proof of Thomas Merton's baptism. The registers of baptism of the Anglican bishop of London at that time should have a record of a baptism on the continent. I have not confirmed if this is the case.

8. *Ibid.*, 116.

During his early years, Thomas Merton observed few formal religious practices. In 1920, his paternal grandmother Gertrude Merton accompanied by Agnes Gertrude Stonehewer Merton, or Aunt Kit, his father's younger sister, arrived from New Zealand for a visit. When asked if he prayed, Merton acknowledged he did not know the "Our Father."<sup>9</sup> His grandmother taught Merton the prayer. He rarely recited it. On August 6, 1955, Merton wrote his friend Thérèse Lentfoehr, a Salvatorian sister. He asked her to "say a good big prayer for my old New Zealand grandmother who is really OLD. She is going to be a hundred . . . I hope it doesn't run in the family."<sup>10</sup> Gertrude Merton died the next year at the age of a hundred and one.

Among relatives, Merton felt closest to Aunt Kit. He corresponded with her more or less regularly. She died just before Easter 1968 in a shipwreck.

At Columbia University, Merton sought God's call on his life. A Hindu friend, Mahanambrata Brahmachari, seeded Merton's journey into Catholicism. He encouraged Merton, "There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and *The Imitation of Christ*."<sup>11</sup> Merton did. Pursuing this path, Merton was baptized as a Roman Catholic on November 16, 1938.

Starting the fall of 1940, Merton taught English literature in Olean, New York, at St. Bonaventure College, a Franciscan institution. Merton had previously explored joining the order. In his application, he revealed his past and possibly continuing sexual escapades. Moreover, he was a recent convert. Following Canon Law, an applicant should have been a practicing Catholic for two years before being accepted into an order. When Merton applied to the Franciscans in New York City, he had been a Catholic for only a few months. Accordingly, the Franciscans rejected his application.

Merton led a comfortable life at Olean. Despite the insularity of campus life, he wrestled with the idea of remaining there. During this period, the Russian-born Baroness Catherine de Hueck (1896–1985) had come to the conviction that she must witness to Jesus through her life. As she implemented a radical way of living in New York City, young men and women came to join her. In 1938, she opened a Friendship House in

9. *Ibid.*, 9; some call the prayer "The Lord's Prayer."

10. *Road to Joy*, 220. Hereafter, *RJ*.

11. *SSM*, 198.

Harlem. Residents concentrated on racial justice and on living the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi. Informally, Catherine became Merton's spiritual advisor. She invited him to join her in serving the poor in Harlem. Hoping Merton would join her work, she advised, "St. Bonaventure is a respectable golf club where quite a few saints have lost themselves on its greens. Some day it is going to change all the golfers into saints."<sup>12</sup>

Catherine's ministry and her closeness to people who loved Christ appealed to Merton. He spent the summer of 1941 in Harlem. In the fall, as Merton struggled with God's call on his life, he considered a career at the Friendship House, which provided him a "close and immediate and visible association with any group of those who had banded themselves together to form a small, secret colony of the Kingdom of Heaven in this earth of exile."<sup>13</sup> In his journal, Merton mentioned the values that flowed from his experience of Catherine's ministry.

There is no question I can't stay at Saint Bonaventure any more: I must go and find Christ where He really is—in real poverty and sacrifice.

But then, what about Friendship House: it has this one great thing: it is real poverty, it is real sacrifice; it is real love of Christ in the poor. It is holy. The work is holy. The Baroness is a saint. Harlem is full of saints. And in Harlem there is no doubt of possibility even of martyrdom, in which my sins would all vanish at once. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Merton wrote poetry for the *Harlem Friendship House News* and acknowledged he owed much to Catherine. He dedicated "Aubade-Harlem" to Catherine. The poem reads in part,

Daylight has driven iron spikes,  
Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet:  
Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem.

Along the white halls of the clinics and the hospitals  
Pilate evaporates with a cry:  
They have cut down two hundred Judases,

12. Baroness to Merton, October 14, 1941, in Wild, *Compassionate Fire: Letters of Merton and Doherty*, 12.

13. *SSM*, 349.

14. *Run to the Mountain*, 464, entry for November 29, 1941; hereafter *RM*.

Hanged by the neck in the opera houses and the museum.  
 Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,  
 The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,  
 Crucify, against the fearful light,  
 The ragged dresses of the little children.<sup>15</sup>

In the spring of 1941, Merton's spiritual wrestling led him to spend a few days on retreat at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Asked if he had come to stay, Merton replied, "Oh no!" The question sounded too much like the voice of conscience. It terrified Merton.<sup>16</sup>

Merton had a tremendous experience at Gethsemani. In his journal, he observed, "This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding this country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is this monastery if only this one. (There must be two or three others.)"<sup>17</sup>

In September, Merton made a retreat at another Trappist monastery in Cumberland, Rhode Island. Merton described the Abbey of Our Lady of the Valley (now Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts) in his journal. He wrote that he had a sense God was leading him elsewhere. "To love this place, just as a pretty place, is harder than to love the pleasantness of Gethsamani, with the hills and fields all around it."<sup>18</sup> In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton observed, "Here at the Valley I was filled with the same unutterable respect for the Cistercian life, but there was no special desire to enter that particular monastery."<sup>19</sup>

Committing to the monastic life at Gethsemani, Merton explained to Catherine that the routines at Friendship House seemed no different from those teaching at St. Bonaventure. In response, Catherine affirmed his decision. "Dear Tom, Your letter was awaiting me upon my return. It would be foolish for me to say that I wasn't disappointed, and yet . . . probably it is the will of God. . . . How wonderful, how perfect! A Trappist and a priest! High is your calling, dear friend, and wonderful to behold the Face of God in silence. It is awesome and ever so consoling. . . . God be with

15. *Collected Poems*, 82–83, hereafter *CP*; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 5–6.

16. *SSM*, 321.

17. *RM*, 333, entry for April 7, 1941, cf. *SSM*, 325.

18. *Ibid.*, 393, entry for September 2, 1941.

19. *SSM*, 352.

you as well as my poor and humble prayers. Write to me. Affectionately, Catherine de Hueck.”<sup>20</sup>

Others were less excited. Learning of his decision, Columbia University advisor Mark Van Doren said, “We’ll never hear from him again. He’s taken a vow of silence, he can’t write to us nor we to him—he’s leaving the world. I think he’s an extraordinary young man, and I don’t believe we’ll ever hear another word from him.” Naomi Burton, Merton’s literary agent, reacted, “Oh God! He’ll never write again!”<sup>21</sup>

In late 1941, as Merton prepared to set off for the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, he packed all that he would take in one suitcase. He gave most of his clothes for Catherine to distribute at Friendship House in Harlem, New York City. Merton also sent her a manuscript with the understanding she would arrange to publish his Cuban journal and use the royalties in support of her ministry. In 1959, the book appeared as *The Secular Journal*. Merton wrote, “I owe much to Catherine, and I am glad that this book can help Madonna House in some way.”<sup>22</sup>

Merton gave notes and books to the library of St. Bonaventure College. He threw a great deal of other material into an incinerator with the exception of the draft of one novel and several poems that Merton sent to Mark Van Doren, his faculty advisor at Columbia. These poems were published as Merton’s first book, *Thirty Poems*, in 1944. Van Doren arranged for the publication with New Directions.

Van Doren also arranged for publication of *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, which appeared in two editions. The first, in 1959, included an introduction by Van Doren, seventy-two poems (all but four of which had appeared in Merton’s earlier books), and an essay by Merton entitled “Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal.” An enlarged edition appeared in 1967.

20. Merton to de Hueck, December 6, 1941; de Hueck to Merton, December 13, 1941, both in Wild, 21–25.

21. Robert Giroux cites Van Doren in Wilkes, *Merton, by Those Who Knew Him Best*, 18; Van Doren, *Autobiography*, 268. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 202, cites Naomi Burton. She was an agent for several aspiring writers, including Merton. Unsuccessful in selling Merton’s novels to a publisher, she sent the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to Robert Giroux, an editor at Harcourt Brace, which published the book in 1948. In 1951, she married Melville E. (Ned) Stone. When Merton set up the Merton Legacy Trust to administer his estate on behalf of the monastery, she was one of the original three trustees. When she resigned, Robert Giroux replaced her.

22. *Secular Journal*, xiv, as reprinted in Wild, *Compassionate Fire*, 104.

Before his entrance into the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Merton worked on a number of novels. One, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, eventually appeared in print in 1969 with the subtitle, *A Macaronic Journal*. This referred to Merton's frequent introduction of dialogue in a mixture of various European languages as well as to the book's original title, *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*. In the preface that he wrote in January 1968, Merton recalled, "The novel is a kind of sardonic meditation on the world in which I then found myself: an attempt to define its predicament and my own place in it."<sup>23</sup>

On December 10, 1941, Merton arrived at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. Merton recognized Brother Matthew, who had received him earlier in the year. Merton greeted the monk, "Hullo, Brother." Brother Matthew glanced at Merton's suitcase. He asked, "This time have you come to stay?" Merton replied, "Yes, Brother, if you'll pray for me." Brother Matthew responded, "That's what I've been doing, praying for you."<sup>24</sup>

God called Merton to become a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. The abbey enfolded and sheltered Merton from storms about and within. For Merton, Gethsemani offered more than a place to call home. It was paradise on earth, a place of "ceaseless adoration of God: this is the monastic ideal."<sup>25</sup>

Merton received a new name, Louis, after the French saint. In contrast with his libertine student days, Merton immersed himself in a schedule that was "arduous, confined, raw."<sup>26</sup> He described the rhythm of work and study as "recreation."<sup>27</sup> On March 19, 1947, he made his final vows and, on May 26, 1949, he was ordained as a priest. Work assignments included those of forester, master of students (1951–1955), and master of novices (1955–1965).

The heart of Merton's monastic practice revolved around prayer in the monastery chapel where the monks gathered eight times daily to pray together. Monks also sometimes went alone to the chapel, or to a small oratory, which comes from the Latin *orare*, reserved to the monks for private prayer.

23. *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 6.

24. *SSM*, 371.

25. *Gethsemani Magnificat*, 38.

26. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 208.

27. *RM*, 340–41, entry for April 9, 1941.

The monks of Gethsemani followed Benedictine practice. Over a two-week period, they chanted the psalms antiphonally, the alternate singing of verses by one side of the choir, then the other. During the night prayers, called *Compline*, the monks chanted Psalms 4, 91, 134, and, in honor of the Virgin Mary, the *Salve Regina* or another hymn appropriate to the season of the Christian calendar, Advent, Lent, or Eastertide. Silent prayer and the examination of conscience generally preceded confession. The following was the daily schedule in winter:

2 a.m.	Rise (Sunday, 1:30). Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary until 2:30.
2:30	Mental Prayer for half an hour.
3:00	Night Office ( <i>Matins</i> and <i>Lauds</i> ), Angelus, Private Masses.
5:30	<i>Prime</i> (Mass), Chapter, Work, Breakfast.
7:45	<i>Terce</i> , High Mass on Sundays, <i>Sext</i> , Work.
10:45	End of work.
11:07	<i>None</i> , examination of conscience. Angelus.
11:30	Dinner followed by time for reading and private prayer.
1:30 p.m.	Work.
3:30	Reading or private prayer.
4:30	<i>Vespers</i> followed by time for meditation.
5:30	Light refreshment.
6:10	<i>Compline</i> .
7:00	Retire to Dormitory for sleep. <sup>28</sup>

At the time that Merton chose the monastic life, he probably was not aware that his first abbot, Frederick Dunne, had grown up loving books; that Dunne's father had been a bookbinder and publisher in the town in Ohio where Merton's grandfather had once owned and operated a bookstore; or that Dunne had supported one other writer, Father Raymond Flanagan.

Judging from the maudlin quality of some of Merton's early writings, one might ask if Abbot Dunne had any inkling about the direction Merton's literary efforts might take. When he encouraged Merton to ex-

28. Merton, *Waters of Siloe*, x-xi; Merton also provides a summer schedule; Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 595.

ercise his gift as a writer, Dunne doubtless felt that Merton, like Flanagan, might bring needed revenue or recruits to Gethsemani.

Among his earliest books, Merton wrote monastic history, his autobiography, and four volumes of poetry: *Thirty Poems* (1944); *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946); *Figures for an Apocalypse* (1948); and *Tears of the Blind Lion* (1949). Merton's publisher James Laughlin observed, "I was immediately taken with Tom's work even if it wasn't the sort of thing we usually published at New Directions. They were religious poems but not pietistic; and they weren't homilies. They were verbally colorful, full of rich imagery and inventive fantasy."<sup>29</sup>

A directness of language, spirituality, and sensitivity to nature marked these collections. Subjects that dominated Merton's later writing emerged in these early books. One was the natural world as setting and source for prayer. In "Song: Contemplation," Merton wrote:

O land alive with miracles!  
 O clad in streams,  
 Countering the silver summer's pleasant arrows  
 And beating them with the kind armor  
 Of your enkindled water-vesture,  
  
 Lift your blue trees into the early sun!<sup>30</sup>

Another theme was Merton's desire for more time alone to spend in meditation. Merton linked love of nature with silence in an early poem "The Trappist Cemetery-Gethsemani" first published in *A Man in the Divided Sea*:

Brothers, the curving grasses and their daughters  
 Will never print your praises:  
 The trees our sisters, in their summer dresses,  
 Guard your fame in these green cradles:  
 The simple crosses are content to hide your characters. . . .  
  
 Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear  
 Silence, our humble armor.<sup>31</sup>

29. Laughlin, "Thomas Merton and His Poetry," in *Random Essays*, 3.

30. *CP*, 157; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 100.

31. *CP*, 117; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 32–34.

“Song: If You Seek. . .” was published in a later collection, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963). The poem captured the richness of Merton’s thinking about solitude.

If you seek a heavenly light  
I, Solitude, am your professor!

I go before you into emptiness,  
Raise strange suns for your new mornings,  
Opening the windows  
Of your innermost apartment.

When I, loneliness, give my special signal  
Follow my silence, follow where I beckon!  
Fear not, little beast, little spirit  
(Thou word and animal)  
I, Solitude, am angel  
And have prayed in your name.

Look at the empty, wealthy night  
The pilgrim moon!  
I am the appointed hour,  
The “now” that cuts  
Time like a blade.

I am the unexpected flash  
Beyond “yes,” beyond “no,”  
The forerunner of the Word of God.

Follow my ways and I will lead you  
To golden-haired suns,  
Logos and music, blameless joys,  
Innocent of questions  
And beyond answers:  
For I, Solitude, am thine own self:  
I, Nothingness, am thy All.  
I, Silence, am thy Amen!<sup>32</sup>

32. CP, 340–41; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 95–96.

Another topic was Merton's distrust of technology. In "Tower of Babel," Merton dealt with misuse of language to conceal or distort, in ways that shape reality and manipulate people.

Now the function of the word is:  
 To designate first the machine,  
 Then what the machine produces  
 Then what the machine destroys.<sup>33</sup>

A final theme in Merton's early poems was his Christ-centered spirituality. In "The Victory," Merton identified Christ at the heart of his search for roots.

This is the word You utter  
 To search our being to its roots:  
 This is the judgement and the question  
 And the joy we suffer:  
 This is our trial, this the weight of gladness that we cannot bear,  
 But turn to water and to blood. . . .

Make ready for the Christ, Whose smile, like lightening,  
 Sets free the song of everlasting glory  
 That now sleeps, in your paper flesh, like dynamite.<sup>34</sup>

In "For My Brother Reported Missing in Action, 1943," Merton responded to news of the death of his brother John Paul with a strong sense of Christ's presence. The final stanza read,

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,  
 And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:  
 The money of Whose tears shall fall  
 Into your weak and friendless hand,  
 And buy you back to your own land:  
 The silence of Whose tears shall fall  
 Like bells upon your alien tomb.  
 Hear them and come: they call you home.<sup>35</sup>

33. CP, 21 and 256; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 146. The poem appeared in *Early Poems: 1940-42*, published in 1971. It also appeared as part of a speech by the Professor in part 1, scene 2 of a longer verse drama of the same title published in *The Strange Islands* (1957).

34. CP, 114-15.

35. CP, 36; SSM, 404; *In the Dark before Dawn*, 181.

Merton wrote in genres other than poetry. Books, essays, letters, pamphlets, and drawings flowed from his pen. He used his given name rather than his monastic name, Louis. New Directions published most of Merton's titles, including *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, which Laughlin co-edited with Naomi Stone and Brother Patrick Hart after Merton's death.

Thomas Merton's published autobiography was *The Seven Storey Mountain*. On June 20, 1948, Merton received a letter from Robert Giroux of Harcourt Brace saying the book was to appear on the feast day of St. Clare, August 12. In his journal, Merton commented on the book's limitations, "... the thing isn't finished. There are parts badly written, but on the whole, it is the book in which I have tried to put something." He continued,

... now it is about to be launched.

It has been growing so long that I can no longer be diffident or scared.

Since I belong to God and my life belongs to Him and my book is His, and He is managing them all for His glory, I only have to take what comes and do the small part that will be allotted to me: reading the letters of people who will hate me for having been converted and for having written about it, and those of people who will perhaps be pleased. It seems to me there can be great possibilities in all this and that God has woven my crazy existence and even my mistakes and my sins into His plan for a new society ... [all things work together for good (Rom 8:28)].<sup>36</sup>

*The Seven Storey Mountain* appeared on October 4, 1948. At once, Merton began to receive letters from people who had read the book and responded in great simplicity. Merton found most of the letters beautiful, spiritual, and filled with the love of God. Though he felt as if he had known the people who wrote to him for a long time, Merton was unable to do more than respond with a printed card. In his journal, he observed that his correspondents were genuine,

It is beautiful to see God working in souls . . . . The most beautiful thing about it is to see how the desires of the soul inspired by God so fit in and harmonize with grace that holy things seem natural to the soul, seem to be part of its very self. That is what God wants to create in us—that marvelously simple spontaneity in which His life becomes perfectly ours and our life His, and it

36. *Entering the Silence*, 213.

seems absolutely inborn in us to act as His children, and to have His light shining in our eyes.<sup>37</sup>

The writer Evelyn Waugh, who prepared a shorter version for readers in the UK with the title *Elected Silence*, thought that *The Seven Storey Mountain* “may well prove to be of permanent interest in the history of religious experience.” Another writer, Graham Greene, called it “an autobiography with a pattern and meaning valid for all of us.” The publisher Clare Boothe Luce predicted, “It is to a book like this that men will turn a hundred years from now to find out what went on in the heart of man in this cruel century.”<sup>38</sup>

Merton presented the story of his spiritual journey in an accessible way. Merton had something to say that people—not specifically Catholics or Christians—needed or wanted to hear. Best-seller lists, church bulletins, reviews in various publications, and word-of-mouth helped the book attain a wide readership around the world. For over sixty years, it has proved to be one of the most readable and approachable presentations of one person’s search for God.

On May 26, 1949, the day of Merton’s ordination as a priest, his editor Robert Giroux visited Gethsemani and presented Merton the 200,000th issue off the press, done in special morocco binding as a presentation copy. Translations appeared in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, China, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, South Korea, in Spain in both Castilian and Catalan, and Sweden. The various editions and translations have sold millions of copies.

Publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* did not necessarily mean that Merton fully resolved his struggle to find an intellectual, spiritual, professional, familial, and geographic center. Merton desired to spend more time in solitude and, gradually, came to chafe at the busy-ness and business aspects of monastic life as generally practiced at Gethsemani. Excessive activity undermined his desire to spend time in silence and listening. Merton once observed,

For it seems to me that our monasteries produce very few pure contemplatives. The life is too active. There is too much movement, too much to do. That is especially true of Gethsemani. It

37. *Ibid.*, 243. Entry for November 9, 1948.

38. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 243; Bamberger, *Thomas Merton, Prophet of Renewal*, 15.

is a powerhouse, and not merely a powerhouse of prayer. In fact, there is an almost exaggerated reverence for work . . . [d]oing things, suffering things, thinking things, making tangible and concrete sacrifices for the love of God . . . goes by the name of “active contemplation.” The word active is well chosen. About the second half of the compound, I am not so sure. It is not without a touch of poetic license.<sup>39</sup>

James Fox was Merton’s abbot from 1948 until he retired from that role in 1967. At the time of his election, Abbot Fox inherited a monastery deep in debt and with many buildings in need of essential repairs. Fox initiated many new projects including mechanizing Gethsemani Farms with the goal of increasing income from it. In his role as spiritual leader, Fox also sought to meet the needs of individual members of the community. Fox granted Merton use of an abandoned tool shed in the woods where he could spend some hours each day alone in silence and stillness. In a February 9, 1953, entry in his journal, Merton wrote,

It is a tremendous thing no longer to have to debate in my mind about “being a hermit,” even though I am not one. At least now solitude is something concrete—it is “St. Anne’s”—the long view of hills, the empty cornfields in the bottoms, the crows in the trees, and the cedars bunched together on the hillside. And when I am here there is always lots of sky and lots of peace and I don’t have distractions and everything is serene.<sup>40</sup>

The hut offered Merton a partial solution to his need for solitude. It also provided Merton a place to write. In a letter to Benedictine scholar Jean Leclercq, Merton observed, “Writing is deep in my nature, and I cannot deceive myself that it will be very easy for me to do without it. At least I can get along without the public and without my reputation . . . we must be poor and live by God alone . . . The time has come for me to enter more deeply into that poverty.”<sup>41</sup>

In 1955, Merton had a new assignment, that of master of novices, one of the most important positions in a monastery. He wrote Jean Leclercq,

My new life as master of novices progresses from day to day.  
It is an unfamiliar existence to which I often have difficulty in

39. *SSM*, 389.

40. *Search for Solitude*, 29, hereafter *SS*.

41. *SC*, 90, letter of August 11, 1955.

adapting myself. I sometimes feel overcome with sheer horror at having to talk so much and appear before others as an example. I believe God is testing the quality of my desire for solitude, in which perhaps there was an element of escape from responsibility. But nevertheless the desire remains the same, the conflict is there, but there is nothing I can do but ignore it and press forward to accomplish what is evidently the will of God.<sup>42</sup>

Merton was restless. Especially in his journals and letters, he complained that he was making little or no progress in his life of prayer and contemplation. He wanted more time for solitude and silence. He proposed becoming a hermit. Merton thought of founding a new monastery, perhaps in South America.

On November 10, 1958, Merton wrote to John XXIII. His purpose was to congratulate him on his elevation to the papacy. He also hoped the pope would sanction a move.

It seems to me that, as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world—by which I mean a sympathy for the honest aspirations of so many intellectuals everywhere in the world and the terrible problems they have to face. I have had the experience of seeing that this kind of understanding and friendly sympathy, on the part of a monk who really understands them, has produced striking effects among artists, writers, publishers, poets, and . . . intellectuals from other parts of the world.

Merton continued by characterizing his literary activity as an “apostolate of friendship” that also enhanced the reputation of the monastery. Gethsemani was receiving many new recruits.<sup>43</sup>

John XXIII responded generously. He sent Merton a gift. However, he did not sanction Merton moving.

In 1959, still early in his pontificate, John XXIII proposed convening an ecumenical council. To describe its purpose, the pope used the Italian word *aggiornamento*, which means bringing up to date. Bishops,

42. SC, 95, letter of February 6, 1956.

43. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 481–83, hereafter, *HGL*.

clergy, media, and others used the word during the sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) to describe the spirit of change and open-mindedness that marked the gathering.

Merton corresponded with John XXIII on this and other subjects. Monsignor Capovilla, private secretary to the pope, acknowledged that the Holy Father was “impressed” by a letter dated November 11, 1961. In this communication, Merton lamented an “unsettling mood in the United States . . . it is practically impossible to reverse the war machine and to disarm.” Merton observed, “Sad to say, American Catholics are among the most war-like, intransigent and violent; indeed, they believe that in acting this way they are being loyal to the Church.” The letter may have been a source of inspiration for John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, “Peace on Earth.”<sup>44</sup>

In the early 1960s, Abbot Fox permitted Merton to move in stages to a hermitage a short walk away from the main monastic complex. There, Merton read, wrote, and received visitors, including literary friends. He still went to the main house to give conferences and for mass, meals, and mail. On August 20, 1965, Merton became a full-time hermit. He expected eventually to end his days there.<sup>45</sup> Merton described his life in the hermitage in the following passage:

There is a mental ecology, too, a living balance of spirits in this corner of the woods. There is room here for many other songs besides those of birds. Of Vallejo, for instance. Or Rilke, or René Char, Montale, Zukofsky, Ungaretti, Edwin Muir, Quasimodo, or some Greeks. Or the dry, disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra, the poet of the sneeze. Here is also Chuang Tzu whose climate is perhaps most the climate of this silent corner of woods. A climate in which there is no need for explanations. Here is the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzu’s and Fu’s; Kung Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu. And Jui Neng. And Chao-Chu. And the drawings of Sengai. And a big graceful scroll from Suzuki. Here also is a Syrian hermit called Philoxenus. An Algerian Cenobite called Camus. Here is heard the clanging prose of Tertullian, with the dry catarrh of Sartre. Here the voluble dissonances of Auden, with the golden sounds of John of Salisbury. Here is the deep vegetation of that more ancient forest in which the angry birds, Isaias and Jeremias, sing. Here should be, and are, feminine voices from

44. *Ibid.*, 486.

45. *Other Side of the Mountain*, 282.

Angela of Foligno to Flannery O'Connor, Theresa of Avila, Juliana of Norwich, and, more personally . . . Raïssa Maritain. It is good to choose the voices that will be heard in these woods, but they also choose themselves, and send themselves here to be present in this silence.<sup>46</sup>

Life in the hermitage enabled Merton to experience the silence and solitude he had sought for years. He felt he was getting somewhere at last. On April 26, 1965, Merton wrote André Louf, abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont in the French-speaking area of Flanders. Merton explained that the hermitage enabled him to live more fully into his calling as a monk.

. . . for me the experience has been wonderful, and it has dissipated any doubts I may have had about my own need for and happiness in solitude. I have at last the complete sense of having found my monastic vocation. At least in my own mind, I am convinced that I have now found the place which God had destined for me when He called me to the monastic life, and that if before this I was always to some extent unsatisfied and looking for “more,” it was simply because this was needed to complete what God had given me before.<sup>47</sup>

By “vocation,” from the Latin *vocare* (to call), Merton understood his specific calling as priest or monk. He was also expressing his sense of a wider calling to wholeness and salvation.

Twelve months after he had written this letter, Merton underwent a surgical procedure in a Louisville hospital. A relationship developed with a nurse, introduced as “M” in a collection of poetry dedicated to her. Merton was in love! Upon discovery of Merton’s liaison with M, Abbot Fox ordered that any association with the young woman end. It did.

Merton did not regard this as just an episode but as a profound event in his life. It moved him deeply, as it did M. She has chosen not to make public her own reflections on their romance. Publication of Merton’s once restricted journals and of Michael Mott’s biography have brought their friendship to light.

46. “Day of a Stranger,” *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 239–42; hereafter, *DWL*. Reprinted in *Hudson Review* 20 (1967) and McDonnell, *Thomas Merton Reader*, 432–33.

47. *SC*, 276.

Given the powerful emotions unleashed by the relationship between Merton and James Fox, it is remarkable that the abbot turned to Merton as his personal confessor. That Merton served in this role for fifteen years attests to the abbot's respect for Merton, as did his appointment of Merton to key roles in the formation of the monks who would be the future of the community.

In the fall of 1967, Fox announced his wish to resign as abbot. Fox followed Merton by withdrawing to a hermitage where he lived his final years. His life took a tragic turn. In 1977, two men broke into his hermitage and severely beat him. Fox moved to the abbey's infirmary, where he lived another ten years. He died on Good Friday, April 17, 1987. Fox's grave next to Merton's in the abbey's cemetery offers a poignant symbol of their complex relationship.

In early 1968, the monks of Gethsemani chose Flavian Burns to succeed Fox as abbot. The election of a new abbot portended change in the community, including relaxation of restrictions on travel by the abbey's illustrious monk.

Benedictine practice had placed Thomas Merton under a vow of stability. Merton rarely left the monastery except to travel to Louisville on monastery business or for medical reasons. Beyond this, his only trips away were these: in July 1952, he was part of a delegation that looked at land for a new foundation in Ohio; in July 1956, he attended a workshop at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota; in June 1964, Merton met Japanese Zen master Daisetz T. Suzuki in New York City.

In a letter of April 28, 1968, Merton responded to a letter of invitation to conduct a seminar on non-violence at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Merton explained that, with new developments in the Catholic Church, he had given a lot of thought to the question of whether or not he would eventually go out and talk in various places. Merton explained,

The rules of the Order have not yet been changed, but I guess it is quite likely that I could slip out to someplace like Lexington. On the other hand my new Abbot [Flavian Burns] though not being like the old one, would not be very much in favor. And I agree with him. Because if I once started to say "yes" it would be impossible to say "no"—or to do so consistently. And I am afraid that not all invitations would turn out to be worthwhile. In fact, I'd end up just going around talking perhaps rather irresponsibly, and not doing the thing I am really meant to do.

Merton closed by offering to send some sort of statement and recommended people who could read the paper in his absence.<sup>48</sup>

Abbot Burns did permit Merton to look for sites for hermitages. During his travels, Merton led retreats for communities in California and New Mexico in May 1968 and in Alaska in September 1968. Abbot Burns also allowed Merton to accept an invitation to address a gathering sponsored by an international Benedictine organization, *Aide à l'Implantation Monastique*, of Buddhist and Christian superiors at Samutprakarn, a few miles from the center of Bangkok, Thailand.

On October 15, 1968, Merton departed from California on a pilgrimage that promised to be his first extended time away from Gethsemani in twenty-seven years. Rumors abounded and have persisted that Merton had left Gethsemani permanently, or had abandoned Christianity. From his letters of this time, it was clear that Merton looked forward to returning to his monastery, the only home he had ever really known. He felt homesick for Gethsemani and insisted, "I'll always be a monk of Gethsemani."<sup>49</sup>

On the morning of December 10, 1968, Merton addressed the Bangkok gathering. After lunch, he retired to his room. A few hours later, another conferee found Merton's body with a fan lying on top of his body. Merton had probably tried to move the fan. Perhaps he stepped on its faulty wiring. While it was impossible to be certain of the circumstances, the cause of Merton's death was electrocution. Shock and tributes followed. Mark Van Doren, Merton's mentor at Columbia, observed that Merton was one of the great persons of his time or of any time.

48. Merton to George Lewis Fields, April 28, 1968, RJ, 368.

49. Merton to Hart, December 8, 1968, SC, 417. *Other Side of the Mountain*, 166, entry for September 9, 1968.