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Thomas Merton: *non finis quaerendi*

SAMPLE

Thomas Merton is a writer, to use the language of the Enneagram, who engages the reader head, heart, and gut. Further to the point, he is a human being who was engaged in his own life, head, heart, and gut. He was not a philosopher, nor an abstract or analytic thinker; nor would he have claimed to be a theologian, at least in the systematic sense. Because he regularly dealt with theological matters, he more than once found himself criticized because he did not bring system to what he wrote. But Evagrius would have recognized him as a theologian, because he was a man of prayer, and this for Evagrius was what made a person a theologian. He wasn't in any major sense a novelist, although he did publish one novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, and he did write some early novels that he had no luck in getting published. He was certainly a poet, but he did not confine his poetry to those short pieces of very condensed writing that we call poems. His prose, confounding our neat categories, is full of poetry, not only in the sense of those chunks of it that jump out at us as found poems, but in his ability to combine an image with a phrase in a way that activates both sides of our brains. As well as being a poet, he was a gifted essayist, as demonstrated by the recent publication of *Thomas Merton*: *Selected Essays*.[1] Above all, he was a diarist and a correspondent, one of the great diarists and letter writers of his century, inspired to publish edited versions of his diaries by reading the

1 I have cited six of these essays, each from its original volume of publication with the exception of "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," *Selected Essays*, 65–85. The others are "From Pilgrimage to Crusade," "Rain and the Rhinoceros," "Day of a Stranger," "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition," and "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy.'"

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diaries of Rainer Maria Rilke.[2] His letters under various headings, as with this study, or to particular individuals, continue to be published by scholars and editors. The complete journals have been published in seven volumes, and condensed into one—*The Intimate Merton*. He had mined them while they remained private to himself for what he would include in his autobiography, *The Seven Story Mountain*, and in his edited journals, notably *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and *A Vow of Conversation*.

Published journals are in fact a particular form of autobiography; I regularly point out to people that the SSM is simply the first volume of his autobiography, not by itself his autobiography *tout entier*. The published journals can then be understood as further installments of his larger autobiographical corpus. Beyond this, as has often been said, everything he wrote had an autobiographical dimension, whether on the surface it so presented itself or not. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, for example, which presents itself not as autobiography, but as an *encheiridion*, or handbook of the inner life, fell open for me when I realized that almost everything he said in that book in the third person could be transposed into the first person singular, when it would then speak to us directly about its author.[3]

And because his writing is so strongly autobiographical, it is personal. It is not simply that from time to time he addresses the reader directly in his writing, but that it possesses qualities of vulnerability, openness, and invitation that bring the reader close to the writer in a very special way. Read Merton long enough—and it may not take very long—and he becomes your personal friend; and so it is as with writings received from a friend, even letters from a friend, that you find you are reading him. He is a seeker, writing for other seekers, as he indicates in the Latin tag with which he ends *The Seven Storey Mountain*: *sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi*—"it's the end of the book, not the end of the seeking." I'm inclined to tweak that a little, and translate it as "it's the end of *this* book: the seeking continues." It's not that he has not found anything; it is simply that he affirms that there is always more to be found.

Finally, he is a spiritual writer; but *spiritual* is a slippery word, and it must be understood in what senses he is a spiritual writer. In the first sense, he is a spiritual theologian, because he deals with spiritual practice and the interior life. In a second sense, he is a "spiritual" writer, because he appeals to many beyond his own Christian community, especially those who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." Third, he is a holistic spiritual writer, who understands that spirituality has as much to do

2. Mott, *Seven Mountains,* 257.

3. See Grayston, *Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, chapter 2.

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with politics and sex as it does with religion (the three topics we used to be told to avoid in polite conversation). Spiritual and physical are not opposing terms; a healthy spirituality includes the physical realities of human life, including the natural order and its other-than-human species. His spirituality is not "spiritualized," that is, restricted to matters identifiably religious or otherworldly. He points to this in "Day of a Stranger": "The spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual. Spiritual life is guilt."[4] He might have made this clearer by italicizing the word *spiritual* in these sentences, but his meaning is clear. He has no respect for a bloodless spirituality, one that is less than inclusive of what the Spirit includes, namely, the entire cosmos. Thomas Berry makes the same point when he refuses to use the natural/supernatural dichotomy: there is only one universe, one life, one reality, with of course its inner and outer dimensions.

THE EARLY YEARS

Thomas Merton was born on January 31, 1915, in the enchanting little French town of Prades, a name it shares with five other towns in France. But his is the Prades in the department of Pyrénées-Orientales, in the Roussillon region, and in the Catalan-speaking part of France, something that Merton picked up on when the SSM was translated into Catalan.[5] If you take the milk-run train that runs west out of the coastal city of Perpignan, after forty-five minutes or so it will let you off on the platform which is perhaps half a mile/one kilometer from the center of town. His parents, Owen Merton and Ruth Jenkins Merton, both artists, had come to Prades, half an hour north of the Spanish border, because they had been told that the light for painting there was exceptional, which it is. Here is what he says about his birth in Prades in the opening paragraph of the SSM, a *locus classicus* in the Merton corpus. In brief compass, it is biographical, astrological, psychological, biblical, historical, theological and, not least, geographical.

4. Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 217.

5. In a letter to the publisher of the Catalan translation of the SSM, Merton wrote, "You should know that I consider myself, in a sense, a Catalan since I was born in France in the area still known as 'Catalane.' . . . I need no more compensation than to feel through this more united spiritually with a noble and ancient culture and to think that some pious souls may pray for me in the old churches and cathedrals of Catalonia" (*"Honorable Reader,"* 33). The name of the region in French is in fact *Catalogne*, and in Catalan, *Catalunya*: 'Catalane' is the feminine form of the adjective, Catalan.

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> 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. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers. (SSM, 3)

The Water Bearer—Aquarius, yes; but I have always read this as an oblique pointer to his baptism in 1938 at Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan, an event of profound significance for him (SSM, 216–25). *A* great war? Indeed, then and for many years afterwards it was called *the* Great War. His view of the infant he was has more of course to do with the young adult he became than with the innocent child born to Owen and Ruth. His doctrine of man, to use an antique phrase, his Christian anthropology, harks back to St. Augustine, and Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of original sin which dominated Christian thinking until well into the twentieth century. It is a sad, even savage view, at this remove, to apply to the newborn infant that he was, or any other child.

Owen was a New Zealander, and thereby a British subject, which gave Merton his official nationality until he became an American citizen in 1951. Ruth was an American, of a family originally from Ohio that had moved to New York. He was born in the house on *Rue du 4ième septembre* (September 4th Street), on which the visitor may now see a plaque that reads, *Ici est né Thomas Merton, écrivain américain* (American writer Thomas Merton was born here). He and his parents lived there for the first eighteen months of his life, then fled the havoc of war-torn Europe for the peace of Long Island, where Ruth's parents lived. There they settled in the community of Flushing, where in 1918 Merton's younger brother, John Paul, was born. His father's religious background was Anglican and carried with it a certain dimension of religious feeling, but with no particular relationship to the community of faith. His mother's background was nondenominationally Protestant, although by the time the Mertons arrived on Long Island, her parents had affiliated with Zion Episcopal Church, in Douglaston; she had also spent some time with the Quakers. Merton had been baptized at Prades, according to the rites of the Church of England (there was a chaplaincy based in nearby Villefranche), but he says, acerbically and melodramatically, "I don't think there was much power, in the waters of the baptism I got in Prades, to . . . loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul" (SSM, 5). He was given no particular religious instruction until his father's mother,

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visiting from New Zealand, taught him the Lord's Prayer, when he was five years old (SSM, 9).

In 1921, when he was six, his mother died; and his account of this in the SSM (14–16) is very moving. He tells us that his father gave him a note from his mother—this was in the days when children didn't visit in hospitals—telling him that she was about to die: "And a tremendous weight of sadness and depression settled on me. It was not the grief of a child . . . [but] had something of the heavy perplexity and gloom of adult grief" (SSM, 14). For the four years following his mother's death, he accompanied his father on painting trips, John Paul being left with the grandparents. Some would call this kind of childhood "unsettled," but Merton describes it as natural, free, and pleasant (SSM, 19), although it involved its own costs, as he later recognized. By 1925 his father had made enough money from painting to return to France; and Tom, then aged ten, went with him. They settled in the charming medieval town of St-Antonin, in the department of Midi-Pyrénées, in the old province of Rouergue, living first in a hotel, and then in an apartment near the center of town. When not painting, Owen Merton spent his time there in building a house for himself and Tom now called the Villa Diane, and located on a quiet street in St-Antonin now called *Chemin Thomas Merton* (Thomas Merton Lane). After a couple of years he was sent to a Protestant boarding school in the nearby city of Montauban, the *Lycée Ingres*, which he hated, and where he was very lonely. Even so, he did well academically. In his first year at the *lycée* he won the English prize—no surprise there; and in the second year, besting all his French fellow students, the French prize. I take this moment to say that Merton's French origin continued to mean a lot to him over the years. He spoke French at native-speaker level, read many French writers, and acted as interpreter at the abbey of Gethsemani for visiting French speakers. He was proud of his French connection, and thereby of his "European sensibilities" (Letter 33), for which he sometimes stated a preference when comparing them with his American identity. As a Four on the Enneagram, it was one of the factors that made him special in a monastery in rural Kentucky.

In 1929, Tom and his father moved again, this time to England: Owen didn't finish building the house in St-Antonin, and he and Tom never lived there. In England Tom was sent first to Ripley Court, a preparatory school, and then to Oakham, an old "public" school, as the British say—meaning by that what North Americans would mean by private school—a good school of something less than the first rank. He continued there the habit of active reading that had begun as he sat with his father when he was working on the house in St-Antonin, adding Blake, Hopkins, Lawrence, and even Joyce to the list of his favorite authors. Only two years later, his father died of a

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brain tumor (SSM, 81–85), and Merton, now aged sixteen, was entrusted to his godfather, Tom Bennett, a Harley Street specialist, who looked after his financial interests and facilitated his application to Cambridge University. This was not a good time for Merton; and when his godfather discovered that he had lost his scholarship because of bad grades, and had made one of the household staff in his college residence pregnant, he washed his hands of Merton and sent him packing to the United States and to the care of his grandparents. This was a decisive moment for him; from then on he would live and work in the United States.

COLUMBIA AND FAITH

Living with his grandparents, of whom he was very fond, he went to Columbia University, from which in 1938 he graduated with a BA. He found a mentor there, Mark van Doren, and, significant for his writing career, discovered that he had an enormous capacity for work. The friends he made there—van Doren, Dan Walsh, Bob Lax, Ed Rice, and others—he kept throughout his life. He also made friends with Mahanambrata Brahmachari, the Hindu monk who encouraged him to read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ* (SSM, 191–98).[6] He lived hard and fast, and brought himself to the edge of a breakdown, which he forestalled by becoming a Roman Catholic. At the same time as he was living hard and fast, he was also reading Gilson, St. John of the Cross, St. Ignatius, and Gerard Manley Hopkins: a corpus of reading that moved him toward membership in the Roman Catholic Church. He was conditionally baptized—conditionally, in case his baptism at Prades had not been valid, something about which many Roman Catholics in that time would have had doubts—on November 16, 1938, at the age of twenty-three (SSM, 216–25). It can be understood not simply as an act of faith, or as a response to his sense of God's call, but also as his way of finding security for himself in a very insecure world, one that less than a year later would find itself engulfed in the second Great War, World War II.

The three years after his baptism were pivotal and transitional. He started an MA on Blake at Columbia and then began to teach English—first at the City College of New York, then at St. Bonaventure College (now University), near Olean, New York. He was also experiencing an increasing desire to live out the meaning of his baptism in a fuller way. This letter of the period to his Columbia friend Ed Rice describes his sense of living a not-yet-fulfilled life.

6. Cf. Harford, *Merton and Friends*, 19–21; Buchanan, "Search for Brahmachari," 11–13.

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> I am not physically tired, just filled with a deep, vague, undefined sense of spiritual distress, as if I had a deep wound running inside me and it had to be stanched. . . . The wound is only another aspect of the fact that we are exiles on this earth. The sense of exile bleeds inside me like a hemorrhage. Always the same wound, whether a sense of sin or of holiness, or of one's own insufficiency. . . .[7]

In a first attempt to stanch the wound, he approached the Franciscans (SSM, 265–66) and was accepted as a member of their next cohort of novices. But he had not told them about his misadventures at Cambridge or his high life at Columbia, and later, in the interest of full disclosure, decided to share these parts of his life with his interviewer, Father Edmund. The revelations were too much for Father Edmund, and he told Merton that he would not be going to the novitiate (SSM, 288–96). There was also a canonical impediment; anyone entering a religious order needed to have been a Roman Catholic for at least two years, and Merton had been baptized less than two years before, a fact that perhaps only came out at this second interview. He was miserable, and concluded in his characteristic all-or-nothing way that this meant that he had no vocation to the religious life. However, in Holy Week of 1941, at the suggestion of his teacher and friend, Dan Walsh, he went on retreat to the flagship Trappist abbey of the United States: Gethsemani, in Kentucky. Here he describes the impact made on him by his first visit to the place that would be his home for twenty-seven years:

> This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery. . . . This is the only real city in America. . . . It is an axle around which the whole country blindly turns and knows nothing about it.[8]

Beyond the hyperbole, the message is clear: he has found the hospital where his bleeding can be stanched, and the place where his own personal universe, which before his baptism had been on the point of cracking in pieces and falling apart, could be reconnected to its *axis mundi*, its spiritual center. Returning to St. Bonaventure, he went through a process of discernment involving not only the appeal of Gethsemani but also his interest in the Baroness Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem, and his need to deal, in the run-up to the entry of the United States into the war, with the

7. Rice, *Man in the Sycamore Tree,* 48.
8. Merton, *Secular Journal,* 167.

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selective service administration. It was December 10, 1941, three days after Pearl Harbor, and having received a deferment from the draft board, that he entered Gethsemani, intending thereafter to live life in community with the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, as Brother and then Father Louis, his monastic name.

GETHSEMANI

The abbey of Gethsemani, then under the fatherly direction of Abbot Frederic Dunne, was to become the permanent home that he had never had. It was for him, he then believed, the "one good place,"[9] a place for a fresh start. According to his close associate and sometime confessor and physician, John Eudes Bamberger, for Merton Gethsemani was the context in which he would recognize and work through all the crises of identity and vocation with which his gifts and his desires challenged him: "The Abbey of Gethsemani was the place where he achieved his identity as a man, a monk, a priest, a man of God, a poet and a prophet. For he was all of these, and he grew into them and developed in them in this one place."[10] His life there falls into six identifiable major phases:

(1) 1941–44: his novitiate—a time of prayer, manual labor, and initiation into the monastic tradition, as well as some writing and translating;

(2) 1944–49: a time of assigned reading, writing, and translation, of his life profession as a monk and his ordination to the priesthood;

(3) 1949–50: the critical time of "sickness" that I shall explore later in this chapter as a possible precursor to his two major periods of *acedia*;

(4) 1951–55: his work of teaching and spiritual direction as Master of Scholastics;

(5) 1955–65: his work of teaching and spiritual direction as Master of Novices—first the choir novices only, later the brother novices as well, after the integration of the two novitiates; and

(6) 1965–68: the final years—the time in the hermitage, his relationship with M, and the journey to Asia.

9. Allchin, "Importance of One Good Place," 93.

10. Bamberger, "Homily," 226.

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Within this whole stretch of years, it is the third period, the period of "sickness," that stands out, in my view, as critically important. It was a time of tremendous strain and inner upheaval that seems to have been precipitated by two factors in particular. The first of these was occasioned when Merton reached the last of the institutional goals prescribed for him by his membership in a Cistercian community of the forties, ordination to the priesthood, on May 26, 1949, Ascension Day. So what was to follow? All he could see ahead, having made a vow of stability, was monastic life at Gethsemani year following year—life lived within a featureless horizon. This thought takes me to Shelley's great poem "Ozymandias," which ends with these lines: "boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away." Those boundless and bare sands are the lone and level sands of the Egyptian desert of Evagrius and the other hermits, which in their sameness and featurelessness, as Evagrius intimates, invite the arrival of the demon. Merton was aware of this dynamic, as he indicates in "A Life Free from Care," the address he gave to the novices on the day he entered the hermitage in 1965: "A life that has nothing but a straight line towards the grave . . . is a life of care. . . . But you go into solitude to cast your care upon the Lord."[11] The second factor was the writing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948. This, I conjecture, effected in him a profound *kenosis*, a deep psychic self-emptying. He had poured his entire life into the book: what now was left? Only the daunting and elusive challenge of becoming a saint, which his good friend Robert Lax had some years earlier told him ought to be his goal (SSM, 237–38). He affirms this in *The Sign of Jonas*, linking his becoming a saint with his writerly vocation:

> If I am to be a saint—and there is nothing else that I can think of desiring to be—it seems that I must get there by writing books in a Trappist monastery. If I am to be a saint, I have not only to be a monk, which is what all monks must do to become saints, but I must also put down on paper what I have become. It may sound simple, but it is not an easy vocation. (SJ, 228)[12]

These two factors came together symbolically on the day of his ordination, when his publisher, Robert Giroux, presented him with the 200,000th copy of his autobiography, bound in morocco.[13] Here is how Merton describes what was happening to him in this critical period after his ordination:

11. Merton, "Life Free from Care," 220; cf. 1 Pet 5:7.

12. There is general consensus among readers of Merton that the likelihood of Merton being canonized in the formal sense is slim in the extreme.

13. This copy of the SSM is preserved in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center. In a number of citations, the figure is erroneously given as one hundred thousand; see, for example, Shannon, *Silent Lamp,* 140.

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> When the summer of my ordination ended, I found myself face to face with a mystery that was beginning to manifest itself in the depths of my soul and to move me with terror. Do not ask me what it was. I might apologize for it and call it "suffering." The word is not adequate because it suggests physical pain. That is not at all what I mean. It is true that something had begun to affect my health; but whatever happened to my health was only, it seems to me, an effect of this unthinkable thing that had developed in the depths of my being. And again: I have no way of explaining what it was. (SJ, 226)

And then, with the freedom from consistency that any careful reader of Merton soon comes to recognize, and having asserted his inability to explain what is happening to him, he immediately sets about explaining it:

> It was a sort of slow, submarine earthquake which produced strange commotions on the visible, psychological surface of my life. I was summoned to battle with joy and with fear, knowing in every case that the sense of battle was misleading, that my apparent antagonist was only an illusion, and that the whole commotion was simply the effect of something that had already erupted, without my knowing it, in the hidden volcano. (SJ, 226)[14]

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A volcano: a mountain with fire in it, a fire that in these months was consuming something of the unfinished emotional business that Merton had accumulated in his psyche. It also had physical ramifications, long stretches of influenza, and even inability to write. Henri Nouwen sees this time in Merton's life, a time of spiritual darkness and confusion that was also a time of physical debility, as both "a period of terrible anxiety and uncertainty" and a "purification which prepared him for a new task," teaching and caring for the scholastics, and later, for the novices. Nouwen borrows the motif used for the title of the journal in which Merton recounts these experiences: "God called Jonas [Jonah] to go to the people, but Jonas fled to solitude until God let him be brought back . . . to where his real calling lay."[15] It was a time in which isolation, the false self of solitude, contended with the true solitude in Merton's heart and mind. In entering into the true solitude, and realizing in depth the existential loneliness of every human being, he came to know that he had "entered into a *solitude that is really shared by everyone*. Even though he may be physically alone, the solitary remains united to others and

14. His phrase "my apparent antagonist" suggests the personified activity of a demon of some kind.

15. Nouwen, *Pray to Live,* 45–46.

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lives in profound solidarity with them. . . . He realizes that he is one with them in the peril and anguish of their common solitude."[16] A handwritten note to Dom James, written in the middle of this period (June 1950, TMC), testifies to the depth and darkness of this time:

> Things are pretty dark. I feel as if I had a hole burnt out of my heart. My soul is empty. . . . I am less troubled when Jesus gives me solitude and silence. The hole in my heart doesn't upset me so much when I can sit still. The Liturgy fills me with trouble and fear unless I just take it negatively in blind faith, knowing Jesus is acting on me with His love through it all. . . . Please pray for me and bless me.

And yet, as Merton reflects elsewhere in *Jonas,* "there is a return from solitude" (SJ, 261).[17] The solitary does not wall himself up in a solipsistic aloneness, but having found in the true solitude compassion both for himself and for others, he returns to the human community. So sickness had taken him into solitude, and solitude had returned him to health. For, as he says,

> in the depth of this abysmal testing and disintegration of my spirit, in December 1950, I suddenly discovered new moral resources, a spring of new life, a peace and happiness that I had never known before and which subsisted in the face of nameless, interior terror. . . . As time went on, the peace grew and the terror vanished. It was the peace that was real, and the terror that was an illusion. (SJ, 226)[18]

So was this a time of depression? The abrupt way in which it came to an end in December 1950 might suggest that. John Eudes Bamberger says that he never knew Merton to be depressed; but this time of difficulty began before Bamberger arrived at Gethemani. Was it then some kind of breakdown? Merton does use that word in his journal entry of October 22, 1952, a month after his first letter to Camaldoli: "Since my retreat I have been having another one of those nervous breakdowns. The same old familiar business . . . since the old days in 1936, when I thought I was going to crack up on the Long Island Railroad, and the more recent one since ordination. And now this" (SFS, 20). Or is it better understood as a precursor to the major attacks of *acedia* that he experienced in relation to Camaldoli and Latin America? What signs would Evagrius and his spiritual descendants have noticed in

16. Merton, *Disputed Questions,* 146–47.

17. A comment of particular interest when we recognize that it was written in the early part of this difficult period.

18. "[N]ameless, interior terror"—another reference to the "antagonist."

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Merton's own account of what was happening? I have already mentioned the apparent featurelessness of the future that stretched out before him with no identifiable goals ahead except that of being a saint. Cassian would have remarked on his wearied or anxious heart. Solomon would have noted Merton's listlessness and wondered about the limitations placed on his psyche by the prospect of living for the rest of his life in a controlled environment with the same group of people. Norris would have identified his tendency to ennui and impasse. Evagrius again would probably have identified Merton's "apparent antagonist" as without doubt the very demon of *acedia*, an illusion, to be sure, when brought up against the reality of Christ, but very real otherwise; and he would have commended Merton for engaging in spiritual warfare, especially with fear, which his condition demanded. It seems that although Merton's struggle of 1949–50 did not last as long as the two later attacks, and though it did not involve the many others whom Merton pulled into his struggle at those times, it provides us with sufficient evidence to consider it as recognizably akin to those later struggles.

MASTER OF SCHOLASTICS, MASTER OF NOVICES

At the abbot's request, Merton had started giving occasional lectures to the novices in November 1949. In mid-1951, observing that Merton was once again in good mental and moral shape, Dom James asked him to take on the newly created position of Master of Scholastics, an office that he held until 1955. We can see a certain turning toward the world in this time of return from solitude, first of all in Merton's needing to pay attention to the needs of the scholastics, leaving him much less time to obsess over his own difficulties; and then as time went on, an even larger turning, in his new interest in and concern for the world which he had mistakenly thought he had left in 1941. The great moment of realization in this regard was the Louisville epiphany of March 18, 1958, during his time as Master of Novices:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut [now Muhammad Ali], in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs. . . . It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank

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> God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others." To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking.[19]

Everyone who reads Merton pauses over these words; and everyone who writes at any length about Merton will refer to them. This is the moment when Merton turns 180 degrees, so to speak, from a focus on the monastery to a focus on the world *as seen from the monastery.* He saw in this moment that he had been thinking for years that the monastery was a world of its own, a world of renunciation, separateness, and "supposed" holiness. There is some truth in this; but as he vividly realizes, to make it the whole truth is to enter into illusion. Under this illusion, monks are one species of being, the rest of us another species. Now he realizes that *to be a human being is primary, to be a monk secondary* to so foundational a reality. To be a monk is to be someone "special," he had thought, and not to be a monk is to be "ordinary." Now he realizes that the most special thing one can be is to know oneself as and so to be—ordinary.

Merton completed his term as Master of Scholastics in 1955, the same year in which he was so vigorously attempting to leave Gethsemani for Camaldoli, as we will read in chapters 3 and 4, and in the letters. In the fall of 1955, the dream of Camaldoli gone, he became Master of Novices, holding that office until 1965. His work as Master of Novices had a profound effect on him, compelling him to focus not only on his own solitude but also on the solitude of others, and on his attitude to the monastery and its abbot. In 1963 he says this:

> The work is hard, though I am doing more than I probably should, in my concern to be well prepared. But also realize the limitations of anything short of prayer and abandonment, as preparation. . . . Hence in everything I have come to feel more than ever my need for grace. . . . Never has this been so clear to me.
>
> . . . In consequence my attitude toward the monastery changes. They [the novices] have need of me and I have need of them. . . . It is an existential situation which God has willed for me, and it is part of His Providence. . . . I must simply obey God, and this reaches out into everything. . . .
>
> In this new condition my attitude toward the abbot is changing. Of course it is obvious that my complaints and discontent have been absurd. . . . He is what he is, and he means well, and in

19. Merton, *Conjectures,* 156–57. Cf. the original of this in SFS, 181–82.

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> fact does well. He is the superior destined for me in God's Providence, and it is absurd for me to complain. No harm will ever come to me through him—it *cannot.* How could I have thought otherwise? (TTW, 288–89)

Earlier he had testified to the impact his work was having on him when in the preface to *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), his major revision of *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949),[20] he says that its writing

> has been no less solitary than the first: but the author's solitude has been modified by contact with other solitudes; with the loneliness, the simplicity, the perplexity of novices and scholastics of his monastic community; with the loneliness of people outside any monastery; with the loneliness of people outside the Church.[21]

His years as novice master (1955–65) overlap the years of his attempt (1957–60) to go to Latin America, which we will discuss in chapter 6. Somehow he managed to do his work to the satisfaction both of the novices and of the abbot, and simultaneously to put a lot of energy into attempts to leave Gethsemani and the work in the novitiate, as well as continuing with his writing. He both loved the novices and wanted to be somewhere else.

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ZILBOORG[22]

Early in his tenure as Master of Novices, Merton became interested in psychoanalysis. He read widely in the field, and in 1956 wrote a draft for an essay, "Neurosis in the Monastic Life," which he sent out to various friends for their feedback.[23] One copy went via Naomi Burton, his longtime literary agent, to Gregory Zilboorg, a New York analyst of wide reputation.[24] Zilboorg was unimpressed with the essay, which he regarded as amateurish, but even so wanted to meet Merton. An opportunity arose when Dom James, who was having his own anxieties about Merton and about the novices who were leaving Gethsemani for psychological reasons, learned that Zilboorg

20. *Seeds of Contemplation* was first published in March 1949; a revised edition was published in December of the same year. See Grayston, *Development of a Spiritual Theologian,* 64–113.

21. Merton, *New Seeds*, x.

22. Gregory Zilboorg (1890–1959), psychiatrist and historian of psychiatry.

23. Merton, "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life," 3–19. Cf. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 290.

24. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 290–99; Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 172.

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had been booked to speak at a two-week workshop on psychiatry and the religious life, in July 1956, at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. This was also the location of a Benedictine abbey, where Merton and John Eudes Bamberger, who accompanied him, could be housed, and where they would be able to join the Benedictines in their offering of daily prayer. Dom James was to join them for the second week of the workshop. Merton made notes on the lectures, and in their first personal conversation,[25] Zilboorg told Merton, in sum, that he was a neurotic and a narcissist and that his desire for the hermit life was pathological. Merton, it would seem from his account, was entirely ready to believe anything negative about himself, especially when it came from an authoritative if not authoritarian personality such as Zilboorg; he had already, in fact, in a letter to Naomi Burton (March 3, 1956), spoken of his "own neurosis [as] so old and so well entrenched."[26] In a later letter to Naomi, written while he was at the workshop, he says that he sees Zilboorg as "the first one who has really shown conclusively that he knows exactly what is cooking."[27] This comment of Zilboorg—"You and Fr. Eudes can very easily become a pair of semi-psychotic quacks" (SFS, 59)—faithfully represents the tone of Zilboorg's dressing-down of Merton. In a second conversation with Merton, at which Dom James was present, Zilboorg repeated his critique of Merton: "You want a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT.'"[28] This reduced Merton to tears of rage and embarrassment. It was entirely unprofessional on Zilboorg's part, as Glenn Crider makes clear in his "Editor's Note" prefatory to David Belcastro's article "Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits."[29] So far from Zilboorg's comments being any kind of professional analysis of Merton, Crider says that their meeting at St. John's "likely amounts to little more than a clash between two high-profile figures who were unwilling or unable to dialogue about their vastly different worldviews."[30] Michael Mott calls this second conversation "the most damaging ten minutes [for him] since [Merton] had left the world for the monastery."[31] David Belcastro's 2007 article offers a brilliant riff on Zilboorg's comment, wondering what might have happened if Zilboorg, instead of accusing Merton of various pathologies, had simply said, "Ah, I

25. There is a full account of this in SFS, 55–60.

26. Merton, WF, 131.

27. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 296.

28. Ibid., 297.

29. Belcastro, "Praying the Questions," 123–24.

30. Crider, "Editor's Note," 124.

31. Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 297.

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see you as a hermit in Times Square. What an odd image, Merton. What are you to make of it?"[32] Belcastro then goes on to bring together the urban, and indeed urbane, side of Merton with his eremitical side, placing Merton in the tradition of Clement of Alexandria, also an urban hermit.

Dom James, however, found the whole experience illuminating, as he relates to Dom Gabriel Sortais, the abbot general (September 4, 1956, TMC). Somewhat simplistically, he says that "Father Louis definitely has some very serious neurosis. In fact, that is the explanation for all his occasional upsets and crises he has been going through the last several years, and pulling the rest of us along with him." "The rest of us," yes—Dom James himself chief among those so pulled. Zilboorg he describes as "wonderful," and at first he was inclined to agree to Zilboorg's suggestion that Merton go to him in New York for a five-day-a-week analysis for three months, which, Zilboorg told Dom James, and which Dom James relayed to Dom Gabriel, would be all the time he would need to "make a new man out of him," or, more ominously, "make him or break him":

> The Doctor told me that Father Louis is a very difficult case because of his terrific mind. . . . He had Father crying from the tremendous punch behind his penetrating remarks. . . . "You would probably want a hermitage in the midst of the *Place de l'Etoile* [in Paris] with neon signs announcing the fact to all the world. Here sits Father Louis the hermit."

It is to smile, as the French would say, to run across this variant reading of the location of Merton's imagined urban hermitage. Was it there because Zilboorg actually said it or because Dom James thought it would help Dom Gabriel understand what Zilboorg was saying? Merton's journal makes no reference to Times Square; Mott does mention Times Square, but without a source reference; Shannon follows Mott in referring to Times Square, as does David Belcastro in his article; and Dom James, in a letter written two years later to Riccardo Lombardi, SJ, does cite Zilboorg as having said Times Square (August 4, 1958, TMC). Our estimation of Merton will not of course hang on where his never-to-exist urban hermitage was to be located; but the two locations together, New York and Paris, neatly represent both the American and European dimensions of his identity, to which he will later refer (Letter 33).

It is beyond my comprehension, given Zilboorg's public excoriation of Merton, that they stayed in touch, but they did. They corresponded, and Zilboorg came to see Merton at the end of December at Gethsemani.

32. Belcastro, "Praying the Questions," 129.

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Zilboorg's plan that Merton should spend time with him in New York was finally vetoed by Dom James. But the encounter did have two positive outcomes. Merton, on behalf of the novices, and on his own behalf, made contact with a psychiatrist in Louisville, James Wygal, whom Zilboorg had recommended and with whom Merton became good friends; and John Eudes, already a physician, was commissioned by Dom James to qualify as a psychiatrist for the benefit of the abbey, particularly the novices.

The question of Merton's relationship with Zilboorg, and the relevance of Zilboorg's assessment of Merton, came up again around the time of the refusal of Merton's request for exclaustration to go to Mexico. Merton told Dom Gregorio Lemercier, prior of the monastery in Cuernavaca to which he hoped to go, in a letter of December 17, 1959 (TMC) that John Eudes believed that Dom James had told his colleagues in Rome at the time of his visit there in November 1959 what Zilboorg had said about Merton's desire for eremitical solitude: namely, that it was pathological. Later, however, as he told French theologian Jean Daniélou in a letter of April 21, 1960, he had received a letter from Cardinal Larraona, secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, in which he assured Merton that the Zilboorg incident had not come up in the discussion in the Sacred Congregation about Merton's 1959 request for an indult. "So there my suspicions overshot the mark. Meanwhile I have consulted the psychiatrist in Louisville[33] who tells me that I am not neurotic and that my problem here in the monastery is quite a natural reaction to the situation" (HGL, 134–35).

Reading this I am conscious once again of an uncomfortable feeling that Merton, in his insecurity, even with a tendency to self-laceration, is once again accepting as gospel whatever he has heard in his last conversation with someone to whom he grants some kind of authority. Zilboorg tells him he's neurotic, and he accepts this; later James Wygal tells him he is not neurotic, and he accepts this. It will be some time yet before Merton comes into full possession of his own soul.

CAMALDOLI AND AFTER

In chapter 3 we trace the narrative that the letters offer us for the years from 1952 to 1956, his attempt to go to Camaldoli. Chapters 4 and 5 will offer some exegesis and exposition on the letters of the Camaldoli Correspondence. In chapter 6 we will follow him as he tries once again to leave Gethsemani, this time seeking a place in Latin America. This brings us through the refusal of his request for an indult to move there, to the end of 1959 and

33. James Wygal.

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the beginning of 1960. After that, he had about eight and a half years left: the first five and a half devoted to his work as Master of Novices, the last three in the hermitage. They were years of vital creativity. It was in those years that he wrote the passionate letters published so many years later as the *Cold War Letters*.[34] He also published *New Seeds of Contemplation*, his thoroughgoing, Zen-influenced revision of *Seeds*, and a dozen other books.[35] It was also the time that he fell in love, with M, the nurse he met in the hospital in Louisville in March 1966. That very significant relationship we will consider in chapter 7, in which we will follow his struggle to remain faithful to his longtime vocation to solitude and at the same time to understand and honor what he had found with M. After that tumultuous time, only two years remained to him in the hermitage, which, much as he loved it, he was finding less and less conducive to real solitude. So when his new abbot, Dom Flavian Burns, elected in January 1968, permitted him to accept an invitation from Jean Leclercq to go to a monastic conference in Thailand in December, he began to prepare for that trip by searching out possibilities, with the abbot's encouragement, for a new location for his hermitage in California and Alaska, and even to consider the possibility of finding it on another continent. Having accepted this invitation, Merton then arranged an itinerary by which he could visit a number of Asian monasteries and religious centers, and meet religious practitioners of many faiths, notably the Dalai Lama and Chadral Rinpoche. As he left for Asia, he said this: "I am going home, to the home where I have never been in this body."[36] And so it was in Asia, many thousands of miles from Gethsemani, yet still in a monastic setting, and thereby still "at home," that Thomas Merton died accidentally on December 10, 1968, twenty-seven years to the day from the date on which he had entered Gethsemani and there begun his monastic journey.[37]

FINAL INTEGRATION

By way of a "big picture" look at the life and importance of Thomas Merton, let me refer to a review essay that he wrote in 1968 on the book by Iranian psychiatrist Reza Arasteh that I mentioned in the Introduction, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality.* Merton particularly liked the book because

34. Merton, *Cold War Letters*, published forty-five years after they were written.

35. Burton, *Merton Vade Mecum*, 43–133.

36. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 5.

37. Ibid., 344–47, for the letter written to Dom Flavian by some of Merton's fellow attendees at the conference.

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it integrated the goals of psychotherapy with a reference to Sufi mystical attainment, the Sufis being the mystical cohort within Islam. By including the word *monastic* in the title of his article ("Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy'"), he was pointing toward what he thought should be the result of the vow of *conversio morum* (literally, "conversion of morals or mores," that is, of ongoing transformation) taken at solemn profession, one he had taken himself: the journey to the true self, liberation, transformation, rebirth, "the final and complete maturing of the human psyche on a transcultural level."[38] Speaking out of his experience as novice master, he asserted that people were "called to the monastic life so that they [might] grow and be transformed, 'reborn" to a new and more complete identity, and to a more profoundly fruitful existence in peace, in wisdom, in creativity, in love."[39] In his experience, however, the institutional monasticism of which he was a part was often less than conducive to this kind of growth. Some novices, discovering this, would leave to look for other contexts in which it might be possible. Others, "the mildly neurotic," would stay and adjust themselves to the institution, "nestling fearfully in the protection of the monastery,"[40] hoping that further and painful growth would not be demanded of them. What then, he wanted to know, would be that "final integration" to which psychoanayst, Sufi practitioner, and Christian monk could all commit themselves? He answers his own question with a description of the finally integrated "man":

> Final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment, which always implies partiality and compromise. The man who is "fully born" has an entirely "inner experience of life." He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense "cosmic" and "universal man." He has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being. He is in a certain sense identified with everybody; or in the familiar language of the New Testament . . . he is "all things to all men."[41] He is able to experience their joys and sufferings as his own, without however becoming dominated by them. He has attained to a deep inner freedom—the Freedom of the Spirit we read of in the New Testament.[42]

38. Merton, "Final Integration," 222.
39. Ibid., 221–22.
40. Ibid., 224.
41. Cf. 1 Cor 9:22.
42. Ibid., 225; cf. John 3:1–12.

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There are many resonances in this passage with what we will read in chapter 6 about Merton's understanding of solitude: the inner ground, the journey beyond the ego-self to the true self, the identification with all people, the freedom of the spirit. I wonder, as the reader may already have done, to what extent, when Merton wrote those words, he was aware that he was describing himself, or, more modestly, describing his own spiritual *telos*. With the last sentence, he is pointing us toward a much older reference to rebirth, the conversation between Jesus and Jewish elder Nicodemus, in which Jesus says to him, "You must be born from above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:7–8). Perhaps this emphasis in Merton is why so many conservative evangelical Christians give major credit to him for nudging them toward faith, toward their becoming "born-again" Christians.[43]

Even so, he asserted that this experience was not limited to Christians. Applying to others the passage I have just applied to Merton himself, he found a fascinating transcultural and transreligious parallel in Arasteh's description of what Sufis call *fana* and *baqa*. *Fana* is annihilation or spiritual disintegration; *baqa* is reintegration and new life on a totally different level. The passage from *fana* to *baqa* is one that involves a terrifying interior solitude and an "existential moratorium," a crisis and an anguish beyond analysis or intellectualization. In sum, it is an experience of disintegration, existential moratorium and reintegration on a higher, indeed, universal level: and here of course I think of Merton's "breakdown" and recovery described earlier in this chapter. According to Merton, the risen ones in every tradition can recognize each other (cf. his visit with Thich Nhat Hanh or Chadral Rinpoche), because the finally integrated person, while retaining all that is best in his or her own culture, can become a transcultural person, "able to bring perspective, liberty and spontaneity into the lives of others."[44] In philosopher Ken Wilber's intriguing expression, he or she is able to "include and transcend." In his conclusion to *Silent Lamp*, his biography of Merton, William H. Shannon also discusses Merton's review of Arasteh, and then asks whether Merton did achieve final integration as he has described it, concluding that it would be presumptuous of him (and if for him, dean as he then was of Merton scholars, then certainly for the rest of us) to try to answer the question in any definitive way. But he does say that "final integration was the direction in which Merton was always moving in the

43. Cf. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life,* 17.

44. Merton, "Final Integration," 226.

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real journey of life that is interior and [in] 'an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.'"[45]

In more specifically Christian language, in a book of some seven years earlier, Merton speaks more personally about this "creative action of love and grace":

> If I allow the Holy Spirit to work in me, if I allow Christ to use my heart in order to love my brother with it, I will soon find that Christ loving in me and through me has brought to light Christ in my brother. . . . This, then, is the mystery of Christ manifesting Himself in the love which no longer regards my brother as an object or a thing, which no longer treats him merely as a friend or associate, but sees in him the same Lord who is the life of my own soul.[46]

If we put these two passages together, taking them as lenses through which we can refract a holistic image of Merton, we see him as a Christian who has become a transcultural and transreligious spiritual teacher. Along with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and Leonard Cohen, each so different from the others, he has burst the bonds of cultural and religious constraint and become a spiritual teacher honored both by the religious and the non-religious.[47] He is prophet and poet, monk and writer, marginal man and trickster, cloistered hermit and public intellectual, solitary and lover, teacher and disciple.

2015: the centenary of Merton's birth. The occasion has generated many ideas for books, papers, exhibitions, workshops, and so on; and my colleagues who work in the Merton industry will like me have toiled on some aspect of the great man's significance for the edification of others. Their experience, I trust, will parallel my own, which is that in keeping company with Thomas Merton and his friends, we find ourselves members of a community of hope, faith, insight, and challenge.[48]

45. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 288.

46. Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 126.

47. For my view that Leonard Cohen belongs in this august cohort, see my "'Monastic in His [Own] Way': Thomas Merton and Leonard Cohen," 3–9.

48. The commemorative volume produced for the Merton centenary gathers together some one hundred testimonials from members of this virtual community: Henry and Montaldo, *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope*.

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For myself, I acknowledge that at some point in this journey, Merton shifted from being simply the object of academic study to being my spiritual director *in absentia*. I realized that I had taken his major concerns—contemplation, war and peace, and the engagement in transforming depth with the world's great religious traditions—as together comprising a paradigm for my walk as a Christian, for my pastoral and academic work, and for my understanding of our world in this time of "the great turning" (Joanna Macy's term). My sense of him is that when he died in 1968, he was operating from about 2050. We still have a long way to go to catch up with him.

I give the second last word here to Ed Rice: "Merton was part of the great Catholic tradition and yet seemed not to be confined by it. . . . Thomas Merton never left us. The journey goes on."[49] And I give the last word in this chapter to Merton himself, the phrase mentioned earlier that he put at the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*: *sit finis libri, non finis quaerendi* ("the book is finished, the seeking goes on")—for him and for all of us.

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49. Quoted in Harford, *Merton and Friends*, 217.

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