Foreword

A long-neglected cache of letters is unearthed in an ancient Italian monastery. They are copied and with the consent of the monastery made available to us by an intrepid soul who understands their value. He turns them into a book that promises to offer new insight into a renowned spiritual writer—the very book you have before you.

It is a strange tale, and an intriguing one. And if it sounds like a story more suited to a tabloid newspaper than the pages of the book, you would not be far wrong. It has all the elements of a potboiler: some of the letters were written secretly, sometimes in code. They involve a not entirely transparent effort to manipulate and possibly deceive certain persons in order to achieve a particular end. It feels like a plot, or to use language common in old Jimmy Cagney movies, a caper. And in a sense it is. Which is part of the charm of the letters and the story they tell. Still, to characterize the story in this way hardly does justice to its complexity and depth. Neither does it adequately express why these letters and the story they tell matter, or might matter to us. Which, I believe, they do.

The story Donald Grayston tells in this book does indeed arise from his discovery of said cache of letters. The author? Thomas Merton, who was at the time of their writing in the mid-1950s living as a Trappist monk (and well-known spiritual writer) at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. He had come to a kind of impasse in his monastic vocation and thought it would be best for him to leave Gethsemani, ideally for a monastic community where solitude was taken more seriously. Thus his correspondence with the superior of the Monastery of Camaldoli in Italy. And yes, it had to be conducted in secret, with code words used for delicate matters having to do with Merton's possible "transfer"("say the roses are in bloom" if the way looks clear, Merton says to the Italian superior)—lest his abbot at Gethsemani discover what he was planning and put an end to Merton's hopes for a transfer.

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Much of this is humorous, both in the intended and unintended senses. It is indeed hard not to smile (or wince) when reading parts of this correspondence. The intrigue, the evasions, the secrets. The only thing missing is invisible ink. Still, for Merton, the stakes were high. He did, after all, feel as though he had reached the end of something in himself and was no longer certain he would be able to continue his monastic vocation at Gethsemani. He was pinning all his hopes on a transfer to Camaldoli. Perhaps he was justified in being cautious, secretive, even devious in the way he conducted this correspondence. He was in turmoil and he was seeking a way forward, a way out.

All of this matters to our understanding of the correspondence. But it is not all that matters. That, it seems to me, is the insight these letters provide about a moment in Thomas Merton's life that would determine so much of what was to follow. A moment of truth, as we sometimes say. For the letters reveal, not always in a way that places Merton in a favorable light, what it feels like to grapple with the kind of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that can sometimes undo a person. A moment of crisis in which it no longer feels possible to imagine a future. When life has lost its savor. When the struggle you are engaged in to understand and come to terms with yourself is no casual matter but will determine how you will live from this point forward. It is in this sense that the letters matter, or might matter—not only to our understanding of the life and writings of Thomas Merton but also, potentially, to our understanding of ourselves.

For the crisis Merton experienced, while utterly particular to him and rooted in the particular circumstances of his life, also has a more universal resonance. It was after all a crisis of meaning, in which his very capacity to live his life with feeling and hope and purpose had come into question. Sensitive readers will perhaps ask themselves whether Thomas Merton was at times suffering from depression. Certainly this is possible. And it might help us account for something of what we encounter during this period in Merton's life. Still, this term, at least in our own time, has become so maddeningly fluid and opaque that it is good to exercise caution in making quick judgments about its use in relation to any given person's experience. The author of this book exercises such caution. But he actually does more than this. In drawing on the ancient Christian monastic idea of *acedia*, he offers another way of thinking about the kind of crisis of meaning Merton experienced, a way of thinking about this phenomenon that can perhaps serve as a complement and even a corrective to our predilection for oversimplifying such experience and locating any number of different struggles under the general rubric of depression.

However we understand the crisis Merton was undergoing during this time, the letters serve as an important window into his experience and help

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us feel the texture and complexity and difficulty of his struggle. In particular, they offer us an opportunity to think carefully about the sources and meaning of this moment of impasse, about how he sought to resolve it, and about all that eventually emerged from it. He never did leave Gethsemani: instead, he stayed and (mostly) thrived. How and why this happened is at the heart of the story this book tells. And, given the important contributions Merton was to make over the next fifteen years or so to peacemaking, interreligious dialogue, nonviolence, and social and cultural criticism, all arising out of his contemplative vocation, we are entitled, I think, to view this experience as having been a critical turning point in his life. And to ask how and why he managed to navigate these treacherous waters.

In this and other senses, then, these letters can be seen (to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss) as good "to think with." With their sharp focus on an acute moment of crisis in Thomas Merton's monastic journey, they provide us with a window into a larger world of concerns and help us see them with new eyes. If Merton's struggle was focused somewhat narrowly on his own monastic vocation (understood at the time in terms of where he would live), we can sense in the letters other questions emerging that have a larger, more encompassing focus.

For example, the question of how to discern "the will of God" in his life, a critical concern in almost all great spiritual writing in the Christian tradition, but too often misconstrued as blind submission or an abdication of personal needs and desires. Merton's struggle revealed (to him and to us) how complex and difficult and demanding such questions can be; and how challenging it can be (to use Ignatius of Loyola's language) to discern the authentic ground of our own desires. This is in no small measure what Merton was seeking to do, even if he sometimes inadvertently undermined the process by giving in to his fears and anxieties, or by seeking to exert control over a situation that required detachment and openness. And if he does not always come off as wholly admirable in his response to these events, he nevertheless continues seeking this ground, as honestly and wholeheartedly as he can. This in itself is instructive and can help us read Merton's more mature writing with greater perspective and balance, knowing that his more assured statements about spiritual life and practice arose out of his own crucible of doubt and struggle.

Let me conclude by saying a word about the author of this book. Donald Grayston is not only an authority on Thomas Merton, having read and taught

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and written on him for more than forty years. He is also someone who takes very seriously the contemplative vision of life that Merton struggled to articulate over a lifetime. Not in the sense of living as a monk: his contemplative life has unfolded amidst marriage and fatherhood; in the daily delights (and grind) of priesthood in a parish; as a leader of pilgrimages; as a person deeply committed to the struggle for peace and justice between Israelis and Palestinians; as a spiritual director and teacher of the art of spiritual direction; as a lover of Shakespeare and of the tango. There is an infectious joy that readers of this book will feel, a sense of intimate connection (though not an uncritical one) between the author and his subject, a deep feeling about the importance of asking questions to which there are no easy answers, a sense that contemplative thought and practice (Merton's as well as ours) *matters*. That our beautiful, fractured world needs us to take this seriously. And that thinking carefully through the questions raised in this book might help us rekindle our own commitments to living out such a vision with integrity and authenticity.

That is, as they say, a tall order. But neither the author of this book nor its principal subject was ever one to shy away from a challenge. The story told in these pages transpired well over fifty years ago, during a time that is so far in the past that many of us can hardly imagine it any longer. And the deeply monastic character of this story may also feel distant from us, far removed from the lives most of us live. But somehow this story and all that it expresses about what it might mean to live with openness, honesty, and freedom also feels close to us, familiar. These are still our questions. And this monastic figure from the past century who grappled with and struggled to overcome a debilitating restlessness and listlessness that sometimes threatened his monastic vocation and his very sense of well-being? He still speaks to us, and he can still teach us and accompany us along the way.

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