

Preface

How did Thomas Merton become Thomas Merton? Starting out from any one of his earlier major life moments—wealthy orphan boy, big man on campus, fervent Roman Catholic convert, new and obedient monk—we find ourselves asking how at the end of his life he had moved from where he was at any one of those moments to becoming a transcultural and transreligious spiritual teacher read by millions. This book takes another such starting point: his attempt in the mid-fifties of the last century to move from one monastery to another, from a Gethsemani that had become, in his view, noisy beyond bearing, to a Camaldoli that he idealized as a place of eremitical peace. The ultimate irony, as I relate in chapter 6: the Camaldoli of that time, bucolic and peaceful outwardly, was inwardly riven by a pre-Vatican II culture war; whereas Gethsemani, which he had tried so hard to leave, became, when he was given his hermitage there in 1965, his place to recover Eden, to take up residence in the new Jerusalem.

As you read through the letters, or the chapters that frame them, and acquaint yourself with the details of Merton's life as a member of a traditional Roman Catholic monastic community of its time, you may be inclined to wonder how important this all is, or if it is important at all. In our world of so many pressing needs, in which the corporal works of mercy—feeding the hungry, healing the sick, housing the homeless, and bringing an end to war (cf. Mic 6:8, Isa 2:4 and 58:7)—make insistent claims upon our awareness and compassion, what is my justification for giving so much space to what from some perspectives may seem trivial? Why do we need to know so much about the struggles Merton had so long ago with his abbot, Dom James, or with his own scrupulous conscience?

My response to this goes back to the first sentence of this preface—how did Thomas Merton *become* Thomas Merton? This book, then, relates a story of *becoming*. I believe there is great value, indeed the possibility of real illumination, in seeing how someone such as Merton undertook this

journey of becoming, or, as W. B. Yeats says, how he went from being “the unfinished man and his pain” to being “the finished man among his enemies” (“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”). His journals and his letters lay this journey out for us in raw and marvelous detail. In reading them we see how the *pacte autobiographique* that Merton makes and remakes over the years with his readers shifts from a strongly didactic or proclamatory one in *The Seven Storey Mountain* to one of dialogue, vulnerability, and intimacy in his journals, and to one of self-revelation in his letters. After reading Merton in depth, it is only one short step for us, as reader and writer in intimate dialogue with him, to ask ourselves where we are on our *own* journeys of spirit and flesh, how we arrived where we now are, and where from here we see ourselves going.

Two advance readers of the book have been of great help to me in identifying two particular dynamics that may for some readers interfere with their assent to the book’s basic argument. The first of these has to do with Merton’s relationship with Dom James. An early biography of Merton cast Dom James as the abbatial ogre, with Merton as the subject of his abuse. Later and more realistic treatments of the relationship have tried to counter this approach with a rehabilitation of Dom James as someone faced with the considerable challenge of guiding the life and work of a brilliant and volatile personality, a monk like no other monk in the history of Christianity—a man committed to the monastic ideal who finds himself falling in love; a man with an intense focus on interior life who becomes a public intellectual; a committed Christian who finds himself criticized by certain other Christians for his engagement with practitioners of other religious traditions. This first reader, in sum, told me that I was too easy on Dom James and too hard on Merton, that I over-empathized with Dom James in his twenty-years-long challenge of being Merton’s abbot, and that I was too critical of Merton’s impulsiveness and volatility. I can only leave it to the reader to decide to what extent this early reader was right or not. I am trusting that any critical comments I make about Merton will be read in the purview of my essential view of him as the outstanding Christian spiritual writer of the twentieth century; and I am looking forward to Roger Lipsey’s forthcoming book on Merton and Dom James, which will certainly give a fuller picture than I have been able to provide in this study.

The second advance reader took issue with the orientation of the book, with what kind of book it was to be. Was it to be a solid piece of scholarship, or, conversely, did it run the risk of being a work of excessive empathy, a work in which I might be perceived as claiming a closeness with Merton which I don’t possess, never having met him in the flesh, and so being limited, as all others now interested in him, to what I can learn or intuit about

him from his writings and the recollections of those who did know him personally? It was clear that this good friend was favoring the first approach and raising a serious question about the second. Alas, or perhaps not alas, I have found myself helpless (a favorite term of Gandhi's when he found himself unable—or unwilling!—to change his mind about something) not to do both. Yes, Merton is regularly and appropriately the subject of serious scholarship, and he deserves all the care and discernment we can give to him in that regard. At the same time, in his inimitable and, to some, irresistible way, he invites his readers to sit beside him, to come to know him in a personal way. Many readers (not all, to be sure) regularly testify to this, and add to it the mysterious intuition that not only do they know him, but that *he knows them*—from whatever realm of spirit he now inhabits. There is no agreed-upon explanation of how this happens, but it happens all the time.

Another wondering: should I use as many longish quotations as I have? I know that there needs to be a sense of proportion between the text as such and the quotations that, one hopes, adorn rather than dominate the text. I concluded that I should, because I wanted the voices of the *dramatis personae* to be clearly heard: Merton's voice, Dom James's voice, and the voices of the other correspondents. Merton himself is my model here: in "Day of a Stranger" he speaks of the "voices" he heard in his hermitage: "the dry disconcerting voice of Nicanor Parra," "the golden sounds of John of Salisbury," and the feminine voices of Angela of Foligno, Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Raïssa Maritain. I will leave it to my readers to choose the adjectives that speak most clearly to them of the particular tonalities of the voices of Merton and his confrères.

With these caveats, provisos, justifications, and special pleadings, I release this book from my computer and, through the good offices of the publisher, place it in your hands. I invite you to read it both with critical intelligence and with a tender heart for this great, vulnerable, and brilliant man.

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