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THOMAS MERTON, POET AND PROSE WRITER  
by Sister Saint Elizabeth of the Cross, C. N. D.

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University of Ottawa, as partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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## INTRODUCTION

Raisse Maritain, writing of her adventures in grace, speaks of her first acquaintance with the Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas. During a year of seclusion and withdrawal from all social and secular contacts, she bathed her soul in the "freedom of spirit, purity of faith, integrity of the intellect" drawn from the Prince of Schoolmen. Reliving the "happy emotion of that first contact" as she wrote her book, the author was "carried away as if by a joy of paradise" by the "great light ... flowing into her heart and mind."

The intellectual adventure involved in the preparation of this thesis has likewise been a rich and satisfying experience. The hours spent meditating the spiritual truths so lucidly objectified by Thomas Merton have been in some sense a peering over a half-door into the promised glory of a world of beauty and strength. The mystical sublimity of Merton's metaphysical poetry, the poetry of prayer and contemplation, has brought a sense of intimacy with this world of spiritual promise that could only come from prolonged contact with the serenity of a contemplative.

The writing of this dissertation has also provided the opportunity for acquaintance with a whole galaxy of brilliant minds. Not only has the growing acquaintance with the white lucidity of Saint Thomas opened up a new and

wonderful mental vista: the clear-cut precision of the thesis on contemplative and active vocations, the treatises on sin and on original sin, the exposition of the diamond-cut facets of faith—these, of necessity, lift the student to an atmosphere so rarefied that his pulses beat with the intensity of his mental endeavour.

The group of French philosophers whose thought has so greatly influenced and stimulated Merton's thinking, have their message too for the student of his work—a message that is challenging, purging, maturing. The profundity of Maritain, the healthy and sane medievalism of Claudel and Gilson, the sweet reason of the writing of Raissa Maritain, all these have the effect of cleansing the spirit of a too-facile acceptance of the mundane and the second-rate which lies at the root of our modern futility. In the same tradition of permanence is the influence of the old literary classics, particularly the Divine Comedy of Dante. The powerful symbolism of the Purgatorio, the deep mystical interpretation of the universe are so far-reaching in their effects on a receptive mind that these can hardly be evaluated in a summary.

Among the poets who influenced Merton, Gerard Manly Hopkins, the metaphysical forerunner of all the moderns, is a challenging problem to the student of rhythm, as well as to the reader of mystical poetry. Not less intriguing and compelling is Merton's well-loved Blake.

Lastly, and not least interesting, was the inevitable introduction, through Merton's work and thought, to the new school of contemporary Catholic writers and critics, from Sister Mary Therese, the well-known poet and anthologist, to Father Harold Gardiner, the discriminating and fearless literary editor of America. Gervase Toelle, the brilliant young Carmelite poet, Sister Joslyn and Sister Julie, critics of fine perception, have all contributed analyses and interpretations to our current periodicals. And supplementing these is the personal contribution of Merton's many delightful friends, all of whom are dedicated to some phase of the emancipation of mind and soul. From the successful and busy executive of Harcourt Brace, Mr. Robert Giroux, to the scholarly and priestly Father Ford, Father Merton's friends have been not only an invaluable help, but also a rich spiritual experience.

## CHAPTER I

### CHRONICLE

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.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton, writing from a Trappist Monastery, thus begins the story of his life which he entitles Seven Storey Mountain. From the silence of his seclusion comes, paradoxically, the most sound evaluation of contemporary civilization, the most vocal criticism of modern times. Having tasted of all the joys and disillusionments of modernity, this young super-sophisticate has apparently become:

... the age's best evangel to the sensitive folk who seek escape from things current in the cult of the ultra modern.<sup>2</sup>

In his monastery, this writer (now Father Mary Louis) writes free verse and best-sellers. Yet these books and poems are completely in character with what we expect of a Cistercian monk.

Merton's biography, Seven Storey Mountain, is a

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1. Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1948, p.3.

2. Will Lissner, "Toast of the Avant-Garde", Catholic World, vol. 169, (Feb. '48) p.425.

frank exposure of the life of a young man who searched for the meaning of our temporal existence with such persistent zest, that he found it, at the age of twenty-eight in the "sweet content of Eternal Life", to which the contemplative way aspires.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton's human experiences are neither simple nor ordinary. He was the son of intellectual people, grandson of a strangely emancipated pair. From his very birth he was surrounded by sophisticated thought. His highly individualistic mother strove to raise her children on the precepts of the gospel of Freud. Parents and grandparents endeavoured to direct their sons into lofty, cultural channels. One great gift they gave them was the inspiration and training to strain upwards, away from mediocrity and facile satisfaction, to a fleeting, unknown, but higher good.

Merton's father, an artist, something of a philosopher, and one-time British ambassador, journeyed far in search of inspiration. He perhaps began that search that his son has continued even to the gates of Gethsemani.<sup>2</sup>

Merton, the son, travelling with his father, thus came to know France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, England,

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1. Will Lissner, op. cit, p. 425.

2. The Trappist monastery where Thomas Merton is now a professed monk.

Scotland and America. A life so filled with experience was well suited to the metier of writing. From his father, a musician and an artist, he inherited the intuitive perceptions that make the true poet; from his mother, perhaps, the touch of mysticism that sent him delving into the deeper core of human things. Merton says in this respect:

I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity, and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the mess the world is in, and some of her versatility.<sup>1</sup>

The varied education that Merton received in French Lycees, English Public Schools, at Cambridge University and finally at Columbia, made of him a true Citizen of the World. He left a record of secular success seldom attained by the most ambitious. Records at Columbia University preserve recommendations that revealed exceptional ability. Fearlessly breaking all professorial traditions of reticence, his teachers proclaimed Merton a "brilliant student", an "interesting thinker", a "rewarding pupil", a "writer of talent", a "thinker of promise and depth", an "English scholar of extraordinary ability".<sup>2</sup>

James Laughlin says of Merton:

In 1937 he was at Columbia taking all the prizes in

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, P.4.

2. From files in Appointments and Placements Office, Thomas Merton; Alumni House, Columbia University.

English and editing everything in sight.<sup>1</sup> One of these prizes was the Marion Van Rensselaer prize in Poetry, won in 1937, for a poem called "The Fable of War".<sup>2</sup>

Left an orphan in youth, Merton lived with his rather eccentric grandparents while attending Columbia. Both of these died before he completed his studies: "Pop", his grandfather, in 1936, and "Bonnamaman", his grandmother, in 1937, and left him adrift with no anchoring relatives except his brother, John Paul, a student at Cornell. Thomas took his Master's degree at Columbia and began to study for a Doctorate.

At Columbia Merton came to know Dr. Mark Van Doren who was to be such a potent influence in his life. Writing of Dr. Van Doren's class in Shakespeare, Merton says:

All that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear; we were considering all the realities ... Mark's balanced and sensitive and clear way of seeing things, at once simple and yet capable of subtlety, being fundamentally scholastic ... presented these things in ways that made them live within us and with a life that was healthy and permanent and productive.<sup>3</sup>

The "we" of the quotation includes a group of Jewish boys, Bob Lax, Ed. Rice, Bob Seymour, and Sy Freedgood, who gathered frequently for long intellectual discussions.

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1. Will Lissner, "Toast of the Avant-Garde" Catholic World, vol. 69, (Feb. '48) p.425.

2. Ibid.

3. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.180.

These gatherings later came to include Father Ford of Corpus Christi church, then Chaplain of Columbia.

Merton writes that by September 1938 when he was ready to begin the actual writing of his thesis the groundwork of his conversion was more or less complete.

"And how easily and sweetly it had all been done", he writes,

With all the external graces that had been arranged along my path by the kind Providence of God! It had taken little more than a year and a half, counting from the time I read Gilson's The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, to bring me up from an atheist ... to one who accepted all the full range and possibilities of religious experiences right up to the highest degree of glory.<sup>1</sup>

In that year and a half his conversations with the Chaplain and with his Jewish friends who were all drawn toward Catholicism, his acquaintance with Scholastic Philosophy, with Gilson's Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, Maritain's Art and Scholasticism and the Imitation of Christ, helped the intellectual preparation for his acceptance of the grace of God and the gift of faith.

The year 1939, according to Will Lissner, was one of decision for the young writer. He writes of Merton's conversion:

Steeped in Catholic tradition, with interests ranging

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.204.

from the Gothic to the abstract; from John Skelton, Royal Tutor to Henry VIII, to W. H. Auden, he was converted to the Catholic Faith at that time.<sup>1</sup>

While taking instructions from Father Moore of Corpus Christi, Merton followed a course in Scholastic Philosophy and studied St. Thomas and Duns Scotus with Dan Walsh. Merton writes of this friend that his "... course and his friendship were most valuable in preparing me for the step I was about to take".<sup>2</sup>

On the sixteenth of November 1938, Feast of St. Gertrude, Thomas Merton was baptized by Father Moore of Corpus Christi Church. Merton says that as he stood on the threshold of the baptistry, Father Moore asked the traditional questions:

"Quid petis ab ecclesia Dei?"

The neophyte answered, "Fidem".

Then: "Fides quid tibi praestat?"

"Vitam aeternam".

Then Merton remarks that the young priest began to pray in Latin from the Rituale and "I, who was asking for eternal life, stood and watched him".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Will Lissner, "Toast to the Avant-Garde" Catholic World, vol. 69 (Feb. '48) p.425.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.221.

3. Ibid. p.222

It was to Dan Walsh that the new convert confided his desire to become a priest. From him Merton first heard of the life of the Trappists and was advised to make a retreat there. Lacking confidence in his own spiritual maturity, Merton felt that the Franciscan life was more within the range of his achievement. His entrance with the Franciscans was arranged for August of the following year. Two weeks before his entrance, however, he was advised by Father Edmund of St. Bonaventure's that he was not ready for the Franciscan novitiate and he withdrew his application.

The next year, Thomas Merton taught at St. Bonaventure's College, New York. During that time, he began to live a life of asceticism as a layman of the Third Order of St. Francis. He had already been through the Exercises of St. Ignatius. Now on Dr. Dan Walsh's advice he made a retreat at Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky.

While teaching at the summer school at St. Bonaventure's in 1941, he heard a lecture given by the Baroness de Hueck. As a result of the impression made upon him by this lay apostle, he worked with the members of Friendship House at Harlem for some weeks.

After another retreat at the Trappist Monastery in Providence, he finally went to Gethsemani to become a Trappist.

What Merton lived and experienced in the lecture halls of Columbia, in the night-clubs of New York, in the editorial offices, in the student Communist group, in Harlem, in the beloved conversational fests, and finally in the beautiful little church of Corpus Christi just beyond the campus, fused into a molten, driving force that brought him, still young, to its logical culmination.

Thomas Merton is one of those strangely geared men whose high-powered dynamism causes them to live vividly and intensely, even deeply, tragically and ecstatically so that they experience whole life-times within the span of a few years.

With Merton's entrance into a Trappist monastery begins a new story, the sequel, indeed, and logical sequence of the earlier one but now on a plane so lofty, so beautiful that it seems like sacrilege to touch it with experimental fingers. The story of Frater Mary Louis's life as a contemplative of Gethsemani should be left for the historian of mystics. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Duns Scotus, Abelard, Aelred, St. Bernard, these are his familiars. He speaks their language and breathes with them the rarified air of the mountain tops that "rends the lungs that breathe it."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Clemence Dane, Will Shakespeare.

And now from his new vantage point which lies  
"Beyond the ways of the far ships, farther than the ways  
of fliers",<sup>1</sup> he sees his old life with a new clear vision.  
With eyes "As clear as the September night", he can view  
and interpret the modern world he has left. From his  
seclusion he writes:

I went into the desert to receive  
The keys of my deliverance  
From image and from concept and from desire  
I learned not wrath but love  
Waiting in darkness for the secret strays  
Who like an inward fire  
Would try me in the crucible of  
His unconquerable Law  
His heart, more searching than the breath of the Simoon  
Separates love from hunger  
And peace from satiation  
Burning, destroying all the matrices of anger and revenge.  
It is because my love--as strong as steel  
Is armed against all hate  
That those who hate their own lives  
Fear me like a sabre.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse,  
New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1947, p.88.

2. Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea,  
New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1946, p.101.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CLIMB

Thomas Merton's spiritual epic unravels as a strange and gripping story. Using Dante's symbolism for Purgatory, the author portrays the great miracle of grace in seven storeys up the mountain from the amoral life of a modern pagan to the summit of perfected human joy and liberty in a life dedicated to contemplation.

Dante begins the first canto of his Purgatorio:

...of that second region will I sing,  
In which the human spirit from sinful blot  
Is purg'd and for ascent to Heaven prepares.<sup>1</sup>

The young Merton remained all his early youth in the ante-purgatory at the foot of the hill, before he began the climb that was his "search for liberty".<sup>2</sup> Highly gifted in the natural order, the future poet and writer was prepared by heredity and training for a life unfettered by any mediocrity. In place of religion he was given a strange mixture of artistic idealism and intellectual integrity, a dissatisfaction with coarseness and materialism in a world from which his parents strove to shield him.

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1. Dante Alighieri, Purgatory, (The Rev. H.F. Cary, A. M., translator) New York Wurtele Lovelle, 1881, P.121.

2. Dante, op. cit., p.123.

The author introduces the reader to his parents in his Seven Storey Mountain:

My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not yet of it, not because they were saints but in a different way because they were artists.<sup>1</sup>

Then he remarks:

The integrity of the artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it.<sup>2</sup>

This son of artist parents further explains the integrity of these serious young people:

Neither of my parents suffered from the little spooky prejudices that devour the people who knew nothing but automobiles and movies and what's in the ice-box and what's in the papers and which neighbours are getting a divorce.<sup>3</sup>

The inheritance of "integrity, versatility, capacity for work", "vision", "enjoyment", and "expression" that ought to have made the young modern a "kind of king", had the standards of the world been those of faith, merely prepared him to become a superior sort of product of his age. He admits that he was moulded "in the image of the world into which he was born", created to love God, yet living in fear and in the morass of hopeless, self-contradictory energies.

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.3.

2. Ibid., p.3.

3. Ibid., p.3.

In Prades, France, this first son of the Merton's was baptized. His father obtained this for him because he himself had been brought up a faithful Anglican. Of this baptism, however, Thomas writes:

I don't think there was much power in the waters of the baptism I got in Prades, to untwist the warping of my essential freedom, or loose me from the devils that hung like vampires on my soul.<sup>1</sup>

For a little while the Merton family lived in the peace and the beauty of the French mountain valley. The love for such solitude and intimacy with nature that held the young writer throughout his life seems to have possessed his soul in Prades in the first year of his life. The picture of these years is idyllic:

My mother would paint in the hills under a large canvas parasol, and father would paint in the sun and the friends would drink red wine and gaze out over the valley.<sup>2</sup>

Merton preserves memories as an artist does, in pictures, as a musician in sounds. He writes in this same bucolic strain of his early life in Flushing, New York, after his younger brother was born.

Every evening it was the same tune (that the baby, John Paul, sang) very simple, very primitive, a nice little tune, very suitable for the time of day and for the season. Downstairs we would all fall more or less

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.5.

2. Ibid., p.6.

silent, lulled by the singing of the child in the crib, and we would see the sunrays slanting across the fields and through the windows as the day ended.<sup>1</sup>

There was never any religious instruction for the Merton children. Thomas reveals that although his parents were concerned almost to the point of scrupulosity about keeping the minds of their sons uncontaminated by error and mediocrity and ugliness and sham, they had not bothered to give them any formal religious training. His mother seemed to consider organized religion as below the standard of intellectual perfection she wished for them. Thomas was five years old when his Anglican grandmother taught him The Lord's Prayer.

At this time, too, Thomas's education was begun along progressive ideas. The system seems to have been that of John Stuart Mill and the philosophy that of Freud. The general notion was to confront the child with what was finest in literature and history and science and allow him to absorb it.

Thus the bent of his mind began to be shaped and he built up the vague fragment of a religion and of a philosophy which remained hidden and implicit in his acts. These asserted themselves in "a deep and all-embracing attachment"

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 8.

to his own will and judgment, a "constant turning from subjection", even to things, and a need for freedom of outlook and situation.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Merton wished her son to be independent, original, individual; to have a definite character of his own; not to run with the herd, or be cut from the common bourgeois pattern.

As the mother died in 1921, the training was not permitted to make of the Merton boys good-mannered, polite, intelligent sceptics. Musing over this Thomas writes: "The way would have been all smooth and perhaps I would never have ended up as a monk." This, of course, was the last thing his mother would have dreamed of, "the boomerang of all her solicitude" for an individual development.

Young Mrs. Merton herself informed her little son by mail of her approaching death. He was not allowed to see her. She feared it would make a child morbid to see illness and death. Since this was a death without any prayer or sacrament "to stabilize and make some meaning" of it, Merton admits that it was probably a good thing that he was not plunged into the naked suffering of this emotional crisis.<sup>2</sup> He did not know enough to pray for his mother; it was not until twenty years

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p.11

2. Ibid, p. 15

later, when he became a Catholic, that it finally occurred to him to pray for her soul.

In Exitu Israel de Aegypto  
All with one voice together sang  
... If ye know  
Declare what path will lead us to the Mount.<sup>1</sup>

Now began a new phase in the preparation of Thomas Merton's soul for its ascent up Dante's Mounting.

For a period of some years after his mother's death Thomas travelled with his father. They sought places to paint. For a while his father filled an ambassadorial post.<sup>2</sup> Merton calls this his "prisoner's-base stage". Sometimes he stayed with his father and did not go to school. Sometimes he was left at various boarding houses and attended school. He met all kinds of people and heard all sorts of talk and this he drank in with his wide-open and acquisitive understanding. He was becoming a young cosmopolite, a citizen of the world.

After a successful exhibition of his work in New York, Owen Merton went to Europe, leaving Thomas with his grandparents in Douglaston. In this family the movies were "the family religion" and the Capitol Theatre in New York, his grandfather's "favorite place of worship".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dante, op. cit., Canto II, p. 126.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 22.

3. Ibid., p. 22.

Merton's grandfather, whom he calls "Pop" in Seven Storey Mountain, was a member of the Masonic Order, the Knights Templar. Perhaps because of this, all religions were acceptable to him except those of Jews and Catholics. Merton says that the Catholic Church was the only one against which he had ever heard his grandfather speak with any definite bitterness or animosity.<sup>1</sup>

Part of the young boy's sparse religious training had been the impressing upon him of the idea of the wickedness of the Catholic Church. Because of the dishonesty of certain New York politicians at that time, Catholicism came to be associated in his mind with everything crooked and immoral. This hatred and suspicion of Catholics took root in young Thomas Merton's mind and became part of his mental attitude.

Now Mr. Merton rejoined his son again and both went to live in France. Thomas has a great love and veneration for France, le Midi, especially. He writes of his return in 1925:

... returning to the land of my birth, I was also returning to the fountains of the intellectual and spiritual life of the world to which I belonged.<sup>2</sup>

Flying over Orleans, Thomas's father told him the story of Joan of Arc and this impressed him deeply. It may

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 22
  2. Ibid., p. 30.

have been the first awakening to the touch of actual grace in this young child's soul:

Maybe the thought of her, acting as a kind of implicit prayer by the veneration and love it enkindled in me, won me her intercession in heaven, so that through her I was able to get some sort of actual grace out of the sacrament of her land, and to contemplate God without realizing it in all the poplars along those streams, in all the low roofed houses gathered about the village churches, in the woods and in the farms, and the bridged rivers.<sup>1</sup>

I  
Ante-Purgatory

... For how of him  
Depriv'd, might I have sped, or who beside  
Would o'er the mountainous tract have led my step?<sup>2</sup>

... Meanwhile we had arrived  
Far as the mountain's foot and there the rock,  
Found of so steep ascent, that nimblest steps  
To climb it had been vain.<sup>3</sup>

Now the soul of Thomas Merton was to be launched upon the perilous beginning of his ante-purgatorial climb, steep and difficult and fraught with mortal danger. After a year at the village school of St. Antonin, Thomas went as a resident student to a French Lycee at Mountaubin. This was a devastating experience for the young boy. After describing the school, he writes: "I was to have my fill of bitterness in those buildings in due time."<sup>4</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 32.

2. Dante, op. cit., p. 128

3. Ibid., p. 129.

4. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 48.

Now began the process of corruption of that young soul with all its beautiful propensities for good, the frightening spiritual decay that is the corollary of modern secular education. The picture he draws of the brutality and bestiality of the young boys in this French Lycee causes the reader's mind to recoil in revulsion. Soon the innocent little Thomas had learned "a great deal of obscenity and blasphemy ... simply by being the direct or indirect object of so much of it".<sup>1</sup>

And now the mature Christian Thomas comments upon this phase of his education:

What is the good of religion without personal spiritual direction; without sacraments; without any means of grace except a desultory prayer now and then at intervals, and an occasional vague sermon?<sup>2</sup>

The future writer, however, was already evolving. His favorite pastime at the Lycee seems to have been writing novels. All the villains in these stories were Catholics, who were, for some strange reason, in league with Spain.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas's father, meanwhile, was becoming more and more an intimate and potent influence in his life, militating against the corroding influences of secular education.

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 49.

2. Ibid., p. 53.

3. Ibid., p. 52.

Owen Merton seems to have been a sort of "natural" saint, a man of deep natural virtue. The integrity and idealism of an artist of high calibre were infused with great sweetness and gentleness of character. Towards his son he evidenced an intelligent understanding and that tenderness untouched by sentimentality that is the counterpoint of strength of soul. While he lived he unerringly guided his son toward the mount he was to climb with such labour and pain in after years. Likening his father to Leon Bloy, Merton says:

If he had been a Catholic, his vocation as a lay-contemplative would certainly have developed along the same lines (as Bloy's). He had the same spiritual poverty and all of Bloy's hatred of materialism and of false spiritualities.<sup>1</sup>

In 1928 the Mertons left their beautiful France and its frightful Lycees. Thomas was put to school at Ealing in England. Here, at last, he went to church regularly and sang hymns and read Pilgrim's Progress. Later he was to consider the two years he spent there as his "religious phase"<sup>2</sup>. With clear-sighted self-analysis he criticizes his own lack of religious stability:

If the impulse to worship God and to adore Him in truth by the goodness and order of our own lives is nothing more than a transitory and emotional thing that is our own fault ... We talk about what is

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 55.

2. Ibid., p. 65.

substantially deep and powerful and lasting moral impetus supernatural in its origin ... and reduce it to the level of our own weak and unstable and futile fancies and desires.<sup>1</sup>

In two years Thomas prepared for the English Public Schools and registered at Oakham. He calls his experience there "the harrowing of hell". At Oakham, religious and moral training consisted mostly in vague ethical remarks on obscure ideals of English "gentlemanliness". Charity, here, meant good-sportsmanship, cricket, the decent thing, wearing the right kind of clothes, using the proper spoon, not being a cad or a bounder.<sup>2</sup>

Now his education was beginning to bear fruit and by 1930 Merton became infected with an "intellectual rebellion ... and found himself an individuality with an unhealthy egotistic turn". St. Thomas tells us that "it is the part (in grace) of man to prepare his soul, since he does this by his free will".<sup>3</sup> Yet if God was moving him and drawing him to Himself,<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton was not yet corresponding to that grace. Through the years when Thomas was being given the "best in secular education and was building up the mentality

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 65.

2. Ibid., p. 73.

3. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, "The necessity of Grace", Part 2, Q 109, Art. 7, p. 1129.

4. Cf. Ibid.,

of a secular man, we are given a practical example of the necessity of God's grace and the devastation that breeds in its absence. The very disgust and despair generated in Thomas's soul through these years was to be used by God to prepare his will for the great graces of the future.<sup>1</sup>

Owen Merton was ill now, suffering from a tumor on the brain. Remembering his desolation, Thomas writes that he was

... without a home, without a family, without a country, without a father, apparently without any friends, without any interior peace or confidence or light or understanding of my own—without God too ... without grace, without anything.<sup>2</sup>

His father's death in 1930 plunged Thomas into a depression, which, at its passing, left his soul devastated.

Moral rebellion and apparent emancipation now became the dominating interests in the life of this young derelict, cut loose from the cables of any confining influence. The secular education which was now his only source of enlightenment pandered to his pitiful idealism. He found himself completely stripped of everything that "impedes the movement" of his own will to do as he pleased. Imagining he was free, it took him five or six years to "discover what a frightful

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1. Thomas Aquinas, op. cit., Art. 6, Q 109, p. 1127.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 71.

captivity" he was really in.<sup>1</sup>

Now, he tells us, his "dry soul" finally sloughed off any last traces of religion it may have had. Later he laments:

There was no room for any God in that empty temple, full of dust and rubbish, which I was so jealously to guard against all intruders in order to devote it to the worship of my own stupid will.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Merton was now the "complete twentieth century man" who belonged to the world of poison gas and atomic bomb; a man "with veins full of poison, living in death".<sup>3</sup>

During the summer of 1931, Merton fancied himself in the role of a Communist. He was not sure what Communism was, as is the case of so many, "who do no little harm by their sheer inertia, lost as they are in their own confusion."<sup>4</sup> He considered himself a great rebel who had risen above all the errors and stupidities of modern society. Still through all runs the thread of his determined seeking for better. He sought it in the wrong places and wrong things, however, and would continue in frustration until the Christian religion taught him to "walk the ways of grace".

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 85.

2. Ibid., p. 85.

3. Ibid., p. 85

4. Ibid., p. 93.

When illness overtook the pagan adolescent and he found himself facing death, there was no Ignatian conversion for there were no lives of the saints for him to read. He lay on his bed "full of gangrene" and his soul "rotten with the corruption of his sins", and filled with coldness and indifference even in the face of death, "without any compunction nor any faith".<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in that year the thought of God or of prayer brought to his mind only denial and rejection. When the students stood in the chapel and recited the Creed, he shut his lips tightly, thus stubbornly declaring: "I believe in nothing".

Of the state of his soul at that time, Merton later writes:

My soul was simply dead. It was blank, a nothingness ... it was a kind of spiritual vacuum as far as the supernatural order was concerned. Even its natural faculties were shrivelled husks of what they ought to have been.<sup>2</sup>

2  
Purgatory — First Terrace

... Nearer now we drew,  
Arrived, whence in that part, where first a breach  
As of a wall appear'd, I could decry  
A portal, and three steps beneath that led  
For inlet there ...<sup>3</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 97.
  2. Ibid., p. 97.
  3. Dante, op. cit., Canto IX, p. 151.

The soul of the young Thomas Merton had, no doubt, reached the nadir of its misery. But at this lowest ebb of his soul's darkness, the first of a great series of graces was waiting for him. Like Dante, he stood at the gate of the "Purgatory" of the soul's life. He had still to mount the "trinal steps" of Faith, Hope, and Charity. He had still to be inscribed by the Angel's sword with the sevenfold mark of his "inward stain". He had still to hear and recognize the Angel's admonition: "Look ... When entered, that thou wash thine scars away".<sup>1</sup>

Having finished at Oakham in 1932, Merton visited Rome where he was to meet with the first of these graces. Faith was here to cause some first faint stirrings in his soul. Hope was to light his days for a little while and he was to recognize the love of God through the human Christ of Rome's frescoes and of the Gospel story.

Quickly bored and fatigued by the ugly ruins of the Rome of the Empire, the young artist wandered by accident into a Byzantine Church. It was through his artistic gift that God was to come to his soul. Stirred and drawn by the beauty of the churches he now haunted, he visited all the great shrines of Rome like a pilgrim, though unfortunately without any spiritual reason. He exclaims, however:

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1. Dante, op. cit. p. 152.

... yet it was not for the wrong reason either. For these mosaics and frescoes and all the ancient altars and thrones and sanctuaries were designed and built for the instruction of people who were not capable of immediately understanding anything higher.<sup>1</sup>

From these shrines Thomas began to get some obscure but true conception of Christ. From the Presence of Christ corporeally in the tabernacles, he began to receive the grace of God. His artist's mind caught something of the ancient craftsman's love of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand the stories of the frescoes the young pilgrim read the New Testament. His love of the old churches grew from day to day and now he revisited them not only for the art but for the deepening interior peace that came to him in those holy places. So far, there had been no conversion of the will.

Suddenly one evening he felt, in his room, the presence of his dead father, who seemed to be communicating to him an interior light from God about the condition of his soul. For the first time in his life he prayed:

... out of the roots of my life and of my being, and praying to the God I had never known to reach down towards me out of His darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in slavery.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 108

2. Ibid., p. 110.

3. Ibid., p. 111.

The next morning the deeply moved and awed son went to the Dominican Church, Santa Sabina, took holy water at the door and went straight up to the altar rail, knelt, and said the Our Father with all the belief he had in him. Then for a little while he had peace and joy in his heart.

Without the sustaining power of the sacraments, however, when he withdrew from the atmosphere of love and holiness and went to university at Cambridge, he soon lost this new-found peace of soul. The Cambridge interlude left him with a deep and abiding bitterness. He spent his days trying to stamp out of his soul the liberty God's grace had been planting there. After a year of such life, he went to America for the summer and did not return.<sup>1</sup>

Still the young Merton was in the state of Dante's pilgrims on his first terrace of Purgatory

... all sore beset  
 But with unequal anguish, wearied all  
 Round the first circuit, purging as they go  
 The world's gross darkness off.<sup>2</sup>

The "mercy-tempered justice" would enable him to "stretch his wings" to find the "ladder which leads the shortest way". Now the pilgrim had

... reach'd the summit of the scale and stood

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 111.

2. Dante, op. cit., Canto XI, p. 156.

Upon the second buttress of that mount  
Which healeth him who climbs.<sup>1</sup>

3  
Second Terrace

Writing of his return to America to make his permanent home there, Thomas Merton thanks Our Lady for this grace:

Lady, when, on that night I left the Island that was once your England your love went with me, although I could not know it and could not make myself aware of it. And it was your love, your intercession for me before God, which opened the seas before my ship ... whose track lead me across the waters to the place I had never dreamed of and which you were even then preparing for me, to be my reserve and my shelter and my home. And when 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.<sup>2</sup>

By this time Thomas was too miserable to go on with his strange vague hedonism. It did not take much reflection to show him that his dreams of fantastic pleasure and delight were crazy and absurd and that everything he had reached out for had turned to ashes. He now found that he was vain, self-centered, dissolute, weak and undisciplined. "Even the sight of my own face in a mirror", he tells us, "was enough to disgust me".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Dante, op. cit., Canto XIII, p. 163.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 129.

3. Ibid., p. 133.

Finally, Merton concluded that he, with all his sins and faults, was the product of the times. He traced the corruption of his age to the abuses of Capitalism, and Communism seemed to be the cure-all. He explains that Communism seemed plausible because he failed to distinguish between the reality of the evils which it was trying to overcome and the validity of its diagnosis, and the chosen cure.

The soul of the young college man was striving at this period for some sort of moral reform. With this came a conviction that he must do something about the evils of society and the problems of his time. In his biography, Thomas Merton now frequently identifies first his own soul and its ills, and later the sins of all twentieth century men, with the trouble and hate and degradation in the social and political life of his time. We find this theme in his biography by inference, in The Waters of Siloe, and phrased with bitter conviction in his poems. At no time in his life was his Communism any more than a vague idealism, a passive acceptance of the tenets of the system. The Communistic phase lasted three months.

At Cambridge Thomas's ambition was to experience as much pleasure as possible. At Columbia it seemed to be to accomplish as much work as possible. There were no repetitions in his life--mistake followed mistake perhaps, but each was a new one, not so vicious as the last and each a

stepping stone in his climb up the mount of penance to virtue.

At Columbia Merton worked hard at many things and achieved a high scholastic record. He wrote for all the student publications. His writings in these periodicals drip with bitterness over the social evils inherent in student life.<sup>1</sup> At the end of his second year he collapsed from overwork and fatigue, "overstimulation", the doctor called it. This psychological illness was so distressful that it is rather a wonder that he did not lose his mind.

Frank Sheed tells us that sanity means living mentally in the real world. "But some of the most important elements in the real world", Sheed explains, "can be known only by the revelation of God which it is theology's business to study."<sup>2</sup>

Lacking this knowledge (and at this stage Thomas Merton surely lacked it) the mind must live a half-blind life trying to cope with a reality most of which it does not know is there.<sup>3</sup>

Thomas was trying to cope with a reality which, perhaps, he did not know was there, but which was driving, impelling him in the search—urging him up his seven storey mountain.

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1. Cf. Thomas Merton, Columbia Jester, "Oasis", v.40 (Sept. 1940) pp. 38-39.

2. Frank Sheed, Theology and Sanity, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1948, p. 2.

3. Frank Sheed, op. cit., p. 2.

Now the ascent towards conversion was becoming more rapid. The story becomes the thrilling adventure of the ever perpetrated miracle of grace. The loving "hounding" of the Redeemer can be traced from Merton's very birth. Now at Columbia the footsteps were coming nearer.

4

## Third Terrace

Dante's angel says to the pilgrim as he reaches the third terrace of the purgatorial climb:

If these my words avail not to allay  
Thy thirsting, Beatrice thou shalt see,  
Who of this want, and of all else thou hast,  
Shall rid thee to the full. Provide but thou  
That from thy temple may be soon erased  
E'en as the two already, those five scars  
That when they pain thee worst, then kindest heal.<sup>1</sup>

As the angel encouraged Dante with the hope of seeing Beatrice, the symbol of Reason, so Columbia held graces for Thomas Merton that were to enlighten his reason and finally illumine his soul.

The first influence for good that Thomas Merton's soul found at Columbia came from Mark Van Doren. With his thoroughly scholastic outlook, Professor Van Doren interpreted literature with a sane moral judgment and led his students to a critical rejection of the banal and futile and unbalanced in books. Van Doren remained Merton's friend and

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1. Dante, op. cit., Canto XV, p. 172.

adviser until the day when, not a Catholic himself, he spoke to Thomas of the priesthood.

In 1937 Thomas Merton signed up for a course in French Medieval Literature. He found that his mind was now turning back to the things of the old St. Antonin days. The deep, naive, rich simplicity of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were beginning to speak to his soul. He was being drawn into a Catholic atmosphere and could feel the healing power of its working within him.<sup>1</sup>

The grace of God leading the young intellectual upward seemed to be saying to his heart, as did Dante's guide: "What thou sawest, Was shown, that freely thou mightst open thy heart To the waters, that flow diffused From their eternal fountains".<sup>2</sup>

Now unobtrusively grace was directing his reason along definite channels where fidelity would soon win for him the gift of Faith. It seemed to be just an accident that he bought and read Gilson's Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, yet of it Merton writes: "The one big concept which I got out of its pages was something that was to revolutionize my life".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 171.

2. Dante, op. cit., Canto XV, p. 172.

3. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 172.

He was particularly moved by the scholastic concept of God as Aseity: that God is the pure act of existing.

As a result of the reading of Gilson, Merton at once acquired an immense respect for Catholic Philosophy and for the Catholic Faith he had been brought up to fear and despise. He recognized at last that Faith was something that had a very definite meaning and a most logical necessity.<sup>1</sup>

Now Thomas began to go to church a little—to the Protestant Episcopal Church, where his father had played the organ, for he lived at Douglaston while he attended Columbia. He began, too, to pray a little. This was in the midst of his illness and he writes that the prayer had enough of healing so that he was again able to return to Columbia after some weeks of absence.

It was chiefly through the medium of human friendship that the Holy Ghost worked His ways of grace in the soul of the young man who was striving now very earnestly to follow His inspiration. Merton explains this:

God brought me and a half a dozen others together at Columbia and made us friends in such a way that our friendship would work powerfully to rescue us from the confusion and misery in which we had come to find ourselves ... and our common respect for Mark's (Van Doren) sanity and wisdom did much to make us aware of how much we ourselves had in common.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 175.

2. Ibid., p. 178.

Books, of course, were always important to Thomas Merton and it is not surprising that they should be used by the Holy Ghost in his conversion. In the winter of 1938 Merton received his degree and began working on his M. A. thesis. William Blake's poetry was an early love of his life and he now returned to it and chose it as subject for his thesis. Constant contact with Blake for many months had the result of making him conscious of the necessity of a vital faith. It brought him to recognize the "unsubstantiality and unreality" of the "dead, selfish rationalism" which had been numbing his mind and will for seven years.<sup>1</sup> Merton writes of this new experience:

Before the summer was over I was to become conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God. Yet this consciousness was still simply an intellectual realization and did not yet involve the love of God.<sup>2</sup>

It was in the summer of 1938 that Thomas Merton began reading the Imitation of Christ, on the suggestion of Bramichari, a Hindu student at Columbia. Now, too, in the midst of his studies on Blake, Merton was reading Maritain and Scholastic Philosophy. Up to this time the young student had tried to resolve his problems and those of the world into

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 191.

2. Ibid., p. 191.

a matter of sociological laws and economic forces divorced from Faith and Charity. He writes of Blake's influence:

... I who had always been anti-naturalistic (like Blake) in art, had been pure naturalist in the moral order. No wonder my soul was sick and torn apart, but now the bleeding wound was drawn together by the notion of Christian virtue, ordered to the union of the soul with God.<sup>1</sup>

At this stage Merton not only accepted what he was reading in Gilson and Maritain, Aquinas and à Kempis. He had now begun to desire it. He was receiving what St. Thomas calls co-operating grace and was soon to evidence the third effect of grace in his soul: to carry into effect the good proposed.<sup>2</sup>

He had begun to desire to dedicate his life to God, to His service. He writes that still this notion was vague, obscure and impractical. Nevertheless he was convinced now of the reality of the goal and confident that it could be achieved. Merton proclaims that his muddle of good desires and intentions with human weaknesses and wrong habits of life could only be resolved by grace and docility to grace.<sup>3</sup>

One Sunday, alone and of his own volition, prompted by some unrecognized grace, he went to Mass at eleven o'clock

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 203.

2. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, "The Division of Grace", Q 111, A. 4.

3. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 204.

in Corpus Christi Church. For the first time, he writes, he saw people, men and women and children, young and old, real, living, vital people, go to church simply to pray. And there they prayed sincerely, without self-consciousness. He was impressed by the seriousness and the prayerful atmosphere and he was touched by the sermon.

A young assistant spoke on the humanity and divinity of Christ as given us by the teaching of the Church. He concluded:

And no one can believe these things merely by wanting to, of his own volition. Unless he receives grace, an actual light and impulsion, of the mind and will, from God, he cannot even make an act of living Faith. It is God, Who gives us faith, and no one cometh to Christ unless the Father draweth him.<sup>1</sup>

Merton writes that when the Mass of the Catechumans was over he understood no more and as the solemn part of the Mass approached he was driven from the church by fear.

I suppose I was responding to some kind of liturgical instinct that told me I did not belong there for the celebration of the Mysteries as such.<sup>2</sup>

Peace and contentment now flooded his soul and he could not understand what had made him so happy, for he was "not yet used to the clean savor that comes with actual grace". It was the sermon that most impressed him with a

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 210. Account of a sermon by Father Moore, Corpus Christi Church.

2. Ibid., p. 210.

conviction of the co-ordination, purpose and effect, the vitality, the inevitable sureness of Catholic doctrines.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after this, while reading of the conversion of Gerard Manley Hopkins and of his letter to Newman, Merton was impelled to go to Corpus Christi Church to see Father Ford. He wished to become a Catholic.

Father Moore, the young priest who had preached the sermon the Sunday of Thomas's first Mass was to be his instructor. Merton writes of his teaching: "It is one of the most tremendous things in the world, this planting of the word of God in a soul."<sup>2</sup> His desire for baptism grew and burned in him as he attended the men's mission: "listening twice a day to sermons ... and hearing Mass and kneeling at Benediction before the Christ Who was gradually revealing Himself to me".<sup>3</sup>

After the mission he asked to receive baptism soon. On the sixteenth of November, 1938, his desire was realized. Bob Lax, Seymour Freedgood, Ed Rice and Bob Gerdy assisted. Ed Rice became his godfather—all the others were Jews. Remembering his answered Credo to Father Moore's questions, he mused:

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 212.
  2. Ibid., p. 217.
  3. Ibid., p. 217.

What mountains were falling from my shoulders.  
 What scales of dark night were peeling off my  
 intellect, to let in the inward vision of God and  
 His Truth!<sup>1</sup>

5  
 Fourth Terrace

... I perceived  
 Near me, as 'twere the waving of a wing,  
 That fanned my face and whispered "Blessed they  
 The peacemakers: they know not evil wrath".  
 ... And waiting a short space,  
 If aught should meet mine ear in that new round.  
 Then to my guide I turned and said, "Lord, sire,  
 Declare what guilt is in this circle purg'd".  
 He thus to me: "The love of good, whate'er  
 Wanted of just proportion, here fulfils,  
 Here plies afresh the oar, that loiter'd ill."<sup>2</sup>

The soul of Thomas Merton like Dante, was now reaching the higher levels of the hill of the seven terraces that symbolizes the moral purgatory of repentant sinners in this world, where man by penance and good works becomes free from the tyranny of vice, attaining to intellectual and moral freedom.<sup>3</sup>

After the great gift of baptism the grace of God became like eagle's wings to his soul and he mounted, thereafter, steadily and swiftly.

Even before his baptism Merton had talked to

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 223.
  2. Dante, op. cit., Canto XVII, p. 180.
  3. Cf. Charles A. Dinsmore, Aids to the Study of Dante, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903, p. 305.

Professor Dan Walsh about becoming a priest. Now, in September, the thought possessed him fully. At the Jesuit Church of St. Francis Xavier in New York, at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, it became clear to him that he must make a decision. He prayed that God would make him a priest<sup>1</sup>

Again, the young convert sought advice from Professor Dan Walsh. Together they discussed various religious orders. Merton discovered from this conversation:

What I needed was the solitude to expand in breadth and depth and to be simplified out under the gaze of God more or less the way a plant spreads out its leaves in the sun. That meant that I needed a Rule that was almost entirely aimed at detaching me from the world and uniting me with God. But I did not find out all that in one day.<sup>2</sup>

The new convert was rather frightened at the thought of entering any monastery. He was filled with misgivings about fasting and enclosure and long prayers and community life and monastic obedience and poverty. When Professor Walsh talked of the Cistercians, Merton shared his admiration but had no desire to join that Order. The seed was sown, however, and the growth of his Cistercian vocation shows forth unerringly the admirable working of divine grace in a faithful soul.

Professor Walsh told his student of the Trappist

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 255.

2. Ibid., p. 260.

Monastery, of the life of the monks, of their silence, of the canonical hours, of their work in the fields and of their fasting. Merton feared the rigor of Trappist life and the talk ended by Professor Walsh's giving him a note to Father Edmund, a Franciscan at the Monastery of St. Francis of Assisi in New York.

With Father Edmund, Merton arranged to make application to the Franciscan novitiate for the following August. In the intervening year, he was advised to continue his studies for his doctorate, at Columbia, and to take a position teaching English there.

Now the new convert, a daily communicant and an aspirant to the novitiate of a religious order, was at peace and very happy. Each afternoon he went to Corpus Christi Church to pray and make the Way of the Cross. Now, too, he attempted to meditate. He went through the exercises of St. Ignatius, alone, and without direction, at his own home. Over a period of a month he spent an hour a day in meditation<sup>1</sup>. Now, he says, he was at home at last:

But I was still new-born. I was living: I had an interior life, real, but feeble and precarious. And I was still nursed and fed with spiritual milk. The life of grace had at last, it seemed, become constant, permanent. Weak and without strength as I was, I was nevertheless walking in the way that was liberty and life ...

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 268.

my eyes were beginning to open to the powerful and constant light of heaven and my will was at last learning to give in to the subtle and gentle and loving guidance of that love which is life without end.<sup>1</sup>

Merton was preparing for the Franciscan novitiate with pleased excitement. His entrance seemed to involve no sacrifice and little inconvenience. Suddenly his peace was shattered when he considered who he was, what he had been and how much he had sinned.<sup>2</sup> He realized that neither Professor Walsh nor Father Edmund knew much of the life he had led before he entered the Church. Now he feared that, if they had, they would not consider him fit material for a novitiate. Filled with anguish he prayed, "My God, please take me into the monastery. But anyway, whatever You want: Your Will be done."<sup>3</sup>

The worried applicant explained his fears to Father Edmund who considered that he was only a recent convert, not yet two years in the Church; that he had had an unsettled life; that his vocation was by no means sure; that he was upset with doubts and misgivings; and that the novitiate was full in any case. Father Edmund told Thomas to write the Provincial and withdraw his application. Thomas describes

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 277.

2. Ibid., p. 296.

3. Ibid., p. 297.

his sentiments:

There was nothing I could say. I could only hang my head and look about me at the ruins of my vocation. ... There seemed to me to be no question that I was now excluded from the priesthood forever.<sup>1</sup>

Stumbling out of the monastery Merton groped his way dazed and numb, to the Church of the Capuchins. Confused and miserable, he tried to go to confession to a young monk. Merton describes his experience:

I couldn't explain myself properly and so he got my story all mixed up. Evidently he decided that I was only complaining and trying to get around the decision that had been made by some religious order that had fired me out of their novitiate, probably for some good reason. The whole thing was so hopeless that finally, in spite of myself, I began to choke and sob ... So the priest probably judging that I was some emotional and unstable and stupid character, began to tell me in very strong terms that I certainly did not belong in the monastery, still less the priesthood, and, in fact, gave me to understand that I was simply wasting his time and insulting the Sacrament of Penance by indulging my self-pity in his confessional.<sup>2</sup>

When he came out of the confessional, the boy was filled with a tremendous misery and the belief that he had no vocation to the cloister.

6

Fifth Terrace

... On the fifth circle when I stood at large  
A race appear'd before me, on the ground  
All downward lying prone and weeping sore,

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 297.
  2. Ibid., p. 298.

"My soul hath cleaved to dust", I heard  
 With sighs so deep, they well nigh choak'd the words.  
 "O ye elect of God ...

direct

Towards the steep rising our uncertain way".  
 "If ye approach secure ...  
 And would urge your course with speed,  
 See that ye still to rightward keep the brink".<sup>1</sup>

As with Dante reaching the fifth terrace, so the young penitent received, in the midst of woe, the inspiration not only to go on steadfastly upward, but to "keep to rightward", to the road which would eventually lead to contemplation.

Now he came to the resolve that if he could not enter a monastery he would live in the world as if he were a monk. He would join the Third Order, live as close as possible to the life he was not allowed to lead, live under the same roof as the Blessed Sacrament and teach in a Catholic College. He explains:

I knew that I wanted grace, and that I needed prayer, and that I was helpless without God, and that I wanted to do everything that people did to keep close to Him.<sup>2</sup>

He bought the four volumes of the Breviary and said it every day. This, he writes, was the most powerful and effective prayer he could have chosen,  
 since it is the prayer of the whole Church, and

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1. Dante, op. cit., p. 187.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 301.

concentrates in itself all the power of the Church's impetration, centered around the infinitely mighty Sacrifice of the Mass, the jewel of which the rest of the liturgy is the setting, the soul which is the life of the whole liturgy and of all the Sacraments.<sup>1</sup>

Merton later realized that the inspiration to buy those books was a very great grace. Few things ever gave him more joy. Through the inspired pages, God was sending forth His Spirit, uttering His divine Word and binding the young convert to Himself.<sup>2</sup>

Teaching at St. Bonaventure's, Merton lived the life of an ascetic. He managed to free himself from his old habits and luxuries—no smoking—no movies—no worldly reading. He lived in quiet and seclusion.

The breaking of bonds was not easy. Although his soul was in harmony with itself and with God, he was still obsessed with the "sheer, brute difficulty of it" and the "crushing humiliation" of his former sins that hurt him all the time. Yet the peace of union with God was all-rewarding and he explains its great power in his soul:

Every day it brought me back to Christ's altars, and to my daily Bread that infinitely holy and mighty and secret wholesomeness that was cleansing and strengthening my sick being through and through and feeding with His infinite life, my poor shredded sinew of morality.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 301.

2. Ibid., p. 303.

3. Ibid., p. 305.

In February 1941, Merton conceived the idea of making a retreat during Holy Week at the Trappist Monastery about which Professor Walsh had told him. When he arrived at the monastery the silence and peace and holiness of the place enfolded him in love and safety. That silence spoke to him eloquently, telling him that this was the House of the Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> He wonders how he ever got out of there back into the world, after tasting the sweetness and the kindness of the love with which he was welcomed there.

The many Masses said at the altars set around the church in cave-like apertures—Holy Communion in that atmosphere of intensified prayer—the conventual Mass in the superb dignity of its simplicity—the divine office chanted by voices whose beauty is reserved for that alone—the Lenten liturgy carried out with a splendour, intellectual and effective—all this dilated his heart to bursting. Before leaving Gethsemani to return to his work, he asked for the grace of a vocation to the Cistercians if it were pleasing to God.<sup>2</sup>

Back at St. Bonaventure's he prayed to a new friend, the Little Flower of Jesus: "Show me what to do ... If I get into the monastery I will be your monk".<sup>3</sup> He wrote to the

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 371

2. Ibid., p. 332

3. Ibid., p. 364

Abbot of Gethsemani and asked to come to make a retreat at Christmas, suggesting that he might be coming as a postulant.

7  
Sixth Terrace

Now we had left that angel, who had turn'd  
To the sixth circle our ascending step  
One gash from off my forehead raz'd while they,  
Whose wishes tend to justice shouted forth:  
"Blessed"! and ended with, "I thirst" and I,  
More numble than along the other straits  
So journey'd that, without the sense of toil  
I follow'd upward the swift-footed shades.<sup>1</sup>

So now Thomas, like Dnate, had reached his sixth terrace where life was to be all spiritual, where his swift steps mount unimpeded, where the song of his brethern is "Blessed!" and where man's material needs become less pressing till his one cry becomes: "I thirst for God and His love."

Thomas describes his entrance into Gethsemani Abbey: "So Brother Matthew locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in the walls of my new freedom." He writes of his first night in the monastery:

When we began to chant the Magnificat I almost wept, but that was because I was new in the monastery ... I had reason to weep with thanksgiving and happiness ... in gratitude for my vocation, in gratitude that I was really there at last, really in the monastery, and chanting God's liturgy with His monks.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Dante, op. cit., Canto XXII, p. 196.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 380.

Grace was working rapidly in the novice's soul. By Christmas, his first at Gethsemani, he could write:

I was at last beginning to realize the amazing paradox that God, Who is infinitely above me, was also within me ... But oh, if only we will let Him, He will give us, in His own time and according to the ways of His grace, new senses, spiritual senses and a spiritual understanding by which we shall truly have our whole desire, and shall see Him Who is invisible and possess Him and know Him, not merely as an abstract essence but in concreto; as the real, present, true God, ut haec essentia realized and as it were, owned by us.<sup>1</sup>

With overflowing heart the young monk writes of that Christmas season with its lovely feasts when he tasted "the astounding happiness" of his new emancipation. He writes of his happiness in loving God and in knowing "to some degree" how much he was lived by Him. He calls this his introduction into the life of a Cistercian monk, into the "School of Charity". Yet this was six years before the publication of his biography, when the work of his sanctification was hardly begun. He felt, even then, that much had been done, not by himself—rather, he claims, in spite of himself, by the merciful grace of God.<sup>2</sup>

Frater Mary Louis concludes his biography by saying: "I am beginning to understand". Having climbed so far he is "beginning to understand" and he says to his Lord: "You have

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1. Thomas Merton, "First Christmas at Gethsemani", Catholic World, v. 170 (Dec. 1949) p. 169.

2. Thomas Merton, "First Christmas at Gethsemani", p. 173.

taught me and have consoled me and I have begun again to hope and learn.<sup>1</sup>

## 8

## Seventh Terrace

So day was sinking, when the angel of God  
Appear'd before us. Joy was in his mien  
Forth of the flame he stood up on the brink  
And with a voice, whose lively clearness far  
Surpass'd our human, "Blessed are the pure  
In heart", he sang; then near him as we came,  
"Go ye not further, holy spirits!" he cried  
"Ere the fire pierce you: enter in; and list  
Attentive to the song ye hear from thence" ...<sup>2</sup>

From the other side  
A voice, that sang, did guide us, and the voice  
Following, with heedful ear, we issued forth,  
There where the path led upward. "Come", we heard,  
"Come, blessed of my Father". Such were the sounds  
That hail'd us from within a light, which shone  
So radiant, I could not endure the view.<sup>3</sup>

Frater Mary Louis a professed religious priest has still, no doubt, to complete his purgation to "taste the true solitude" of anguish and poverty. He shall be led into the "high places" of God's joy only when he dies in Christ and finds all things in His mercy.<sup>4</sup>

Faint suggestions of the pain of this last cauterizing of his soul come from Father Mary Louis's writings. In

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1. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 422.

2. Dante, op. cit., p. 214.

3. Dante, op. cit., p. 216.

4. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 422.

"September, 1949" he writes of the interior fighting he has been doing and still has to do, of spiritual joys that may be temptations, of the pain of deprivation of human love, of the troubles caused by his artist's temperament.<sup>1</sup>

There is joy abounding, however, in the peaceful serenity of his assurance of his vocation as a contemplative. Dante sought Bernard of Clairvaux to conduct him up the heights of heaven in his Paradiso, to the throne of God. Father Mary Louis, following Bernard's rule and mystical theology, will give his life to the contemplation of God here on earth as a preparation for the true destiny of man in the eternal union of his soul with the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> The concluding lines of his poem on the "Holy Sacrament" show with beautiful restraint his clear-visioned hope for his ascetic life:

His bread shall be the smiles of Pity's human face:  
 He'll eat, and live with God, at least in longing,  
     ever after:  
 His wine shall be the mortal blood of Mercy, Love  
     and Peace:  
 And, having drunk, he'll hear the martyr's joyful  
     laughter.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Cf. Thomas Merton, "September 1949", The Month, v. 3 (Feb. 1950) p. 107.

2. Thomas Merton, Waters of Siloe, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1949, p. xxii.

3. Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, p. 147.

## CHAPTER III

### THOMAS MERTON, POET AND PROSE WRITER

For Thomas Merton as for Paul Claudel "Faith and Poetry are to be joined together". "Without Faith", writes the French mystic, "poetry is meagre and insufficient". When Thomas Merton attuned himself to God as Claudel in The City, says the poet muse, his poetry became significant.<sup>1</sup>

Merton speaks on writing as the "one activity" that was born in him, and was in his very blood. He had written all his life. He had taken prizes for his poems and essays in all his schools and colleges. During his Columbia and St. Bonaventure days he had written novels, two of which, the Labyrinth and Journal of My Escape from The Nazis, had made the round of the publishers and as Merton remarks, had been fortunately rejected. He had written poems too, for the modernistic reviews; obscure, difficult poetry without discipline and with a ragged unpatterned rhythm. Merton admits that, although he had tried, he never really succeeded in writing poetry until he became a Catholic.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Pierre Angers, S.J., "The Aesthetics of Paul Claudel," Spirit, XIV (May 1947), pp. 50-55.

2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 235.

In November 1938, immediately after his Baptism, Merton acquired a sudden facility for rough, raw, skeltonic verses, one of which took the poetry prize of the year. The rhythm and tones of these poems echoed Andrew Marvel, to whom he felt an affinity of temper.

When Thomas Merton became the poet of the contemplative life, having gone through all the "harrowing" that worked the terrain of his soul, changing it from the materialistic naturalism of the ultra-modern sophisticate to the humble and liberated monk, then his soul qualified for the true poetic experience.<sup>1</sup>

The sympathetic knowledge of the poetic experience receives a supernatural impetus from that compassion that is born of contemplation. This inevitably brings him closer to "the heart of all that is".<sup>2</sup>

In his essay included in Figures for an Apocalypse, Merton points out the kinship between the aesthetic experience and the mystical one, and draws the conclusion:

Christ is our inspiration, and Christ is at the centre of the contemplative life. Therefore it would seem fairly evident that the one thing that will most contribute to the perfection of Catholic literature in general and

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1. Cf. Isabel Harriss Parr, "The Proving Ground of Poetry", Spirit, vol. 8, (Sept. 1941), p. 126.

2. J. S. Middleton, "The Poet's Prayer", Spirit, vol. 11, (July 1944) p. 84.

poetry in particular will be for our writers and poets to start leading lives of active contemplation. In other words, to lead the full Christian life in so far as they can in their state.<sup>1</sup>

Merton brought all the instincts of a writer into the monastery with him and he soon found that the silence and peace were most conducive to composing poetry. He mentions that the time between four and five-thirty, after the Night Office is a "wonderful time to write verse".<sup>2</sup> Then the mind is "saturated in peace" and "the richness of the liturgy", and "whole blocks of imagery seem to crystalize" naturally.<sup>2</sup>

Bob Lax, after his own Baptism, came to Gethsemani to see Merton. When he returned to New York he took with him a sheaf of poems; half of these had been written in the Novitiate, the other half at St. Bonaventure's. Lax took them to Dr. Mark Van Doren who sent them to James Laughlin at New Directions. At the end of the year 1944, they were printed in a little volume entitled Thirty Poems.

Thus began the prolific output that continues to flow. In 1946 a new volume of poems was published containing the original thirty poems with religious verse written by Frater Mary Louis, Cistercian, and entitled A Man in a Divided Sea. 1947 brought out another slim volume of verse,

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 100.
  2. Thomas Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, p. 389.

Figures for an Apocalypse, which contained an essay, Poetry and the Contemplative Life. In the spring of 1950 New Directions published Tears of the Blind Lions.

These poetic works have three theses. They trace the inner story of the poet's spiritual growth; they voice his social criticism of contemporary civilization and they offer a remedial of its woes. It is not surprising that this contemplative poet should consider contemplation as the ultimate catholicon, and so he has become the "Poet of the Contemplative Life".

That Merton writes poetry of unusual calibre is evidenced by the attention he has drawn from the critics. Such acknowledged literary authorities as Harold C. Gardiner, James H. Thielen, Hubert Hart, Gervase Toelle, O.P., Will Lissner, Eric Bruno, O.F.M., Francis X. Connolly, S.J., George C. McCauliff, and the "First Woman of Letters in America", Sister Mary Therese, Lentfoer, S.D.S., have reviewed Merton's books and written critical articles upon his work in the leading intellectual and religious periodicals of the day. Such discriminating reviews as Renascence, Spirit, Cross and Crown, The Month, as well as the more popular Catholic World, Commonweal, and America, have carried articles of enthusiastic criticism of his work.

George A. McCauliff speaks for all of them in a poem to Thomas Merton, "The Poet Turned Monk". This poem summar-

izes Father Louis's three-fold message and touches upon his famous problem of contemplative and poetic vocation.

What man is this who speaks to us  
 With thunderous tongue of Dominations  
 And in soft sibilants of sweet charity  
 While in the vineyard of his verse  
 He prunes the wanton runners  
 And with strong fingers delves  
 In our earth  
 To loosen all the roots of being  
 And set a wild song here  
 Amid the blossoms of his vine.

Here in our neighbouring vineyards  
 We have heard his song  
 Sweeping among the dying leaves  
 Of all our vines, by little foxes gnawed  
 While we stumble in our crooked rows  
 Seeking to break the stubborn glebe  
 With dulled plow of poetry.

Sing yet a little to us poet  
 Before the dark night's cloister  
 Encompasses your vineyard  
 And darker light of your Gethsemani  
 Sends poetry upon its mournful way  
 The while, oh monk, you linger  
 Face to face with God.<sup>1</sup>

There has been a steady maturing of the new poet's art, an increasing sureness and deftness of tones, of handling of his medium. Thirty Poems was acclaimed mostly for the promise they contained. Paul Morton, reviewing Thirty Poems, finds Thomas Merton's sharp imagery a delight. But the odd Huysmans-like patterns, the too-wide conceits and the

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1. George A. McCauliff, "The Poet Turned Monk", Spirit, vol. 12, (July 1945), p. 45.

strongly individualized lines gave a feeling of painful striving to express the inexpressible.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the same reviewer adds that though the "rhyme-reader" may be disappointed in this volume, a more discriminating critic will find a less conventional discipline. For here we find re-presented themes "of an ancient faith" expressed with what is finest "in the modern tradition".<sup>2</sup>

In this book the young poet is already launched upon his three-fold thesis; his spiritual climb, his repudiation of modern materialism and his projection of contemplation as the antidote to the ills of modern civilization.

Paul Morton contends that few modern poets can be said to be "more achingly conscious" of the present world conflict. Yet the accepted treatments of war are entirely absent from his work. This reviewer considers his beautifully poignant poem, "for My Brother; Reported Missing in Action", possibly the greatest of its kind since the "Ave Frater Atque Vale" of Catullus.<sup>3</sup>

Besides a tender love for his "sweet brother", Merton exposes in this poem a criticism of modern civilization in its generent, war, together with an exposition of

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1. Paul Morton, "Review of Thirty Poems", Spirit, vol. 2 (Mar. 1945) p. 24.

2. Ibid. p. 25.

3. Paul Morton, Op. cit., p. 25.

the sacrificial character of the Cistercian vocation.

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
 My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
 And if I cannot eat my bread,  
 My fasts shall live like willows where you died.  
 If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
 My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,  
 Lies your poor body, lost and dead?  
 And in what landscape of disaster  
 Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

Come, in my labor find a resting place  
 And in my sorrows lay your head,  
 Or rather take my life and blood  
 And buy yourself a better bed--  
 Or take my breath and take my death  
 And buy yourself a better rest.

When all the men of war are shot  
 And flags have fallen into dust,  
 Your cross and mine shall tell men still  
 Christ died on each, for both of us.

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.

Sister Julie, writing for America, considers the new poet's work, "the epitome of Christian Life, representing every stage of Christian development from the faith of a newly baptized to the fulness of sacramental life as expressed in, "The Blessed Virgin Compared to a Window".<sup>1</sup>

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1. Sister Julie, "New Directions Presents a Catholic Poet", America, vol. 73, (July 21, 1945) p. 316.

Because my will is simple as a window  
 And knows no pride of original earth  
 It is my life to die, like glass, by light,  
 Slain in the strong rays of the bridegroom sun.

And you shall see the sun, my Son by Substance  
 Come to convince the world of the day's end,  
 and of the night,  
 Smile to the lovers of the day in smiles of blood;  
 For through my love, He'll be their Brother  
 My Light--the lamb of their Apocalypse.<sup>1</sup>

"Aubade--Lake Erie", is the beginning, perhaps, of a series of sharp-toned criticism of contemporary materialism. Having described the clean, cool freshness of the country-side, he suddenly injects: "a hundred dusty rise from the dead, unheeding, search the horizon for the gap-toothed grin of factories, and grope ... toward ... the western freight".<sup>2</sup>

The recognition, in "The Sponge Full of Vinegar", of "the world's gall", of "man's nothing-perfect", and of "God's all complete" is the final word of the volume.<sup>3</sup>

Speer Strahan in the Ave Maria calls A Man in the Divided Sea, a "spiritual biography and an Apologia pro via sisterciensi", such as had not been seen before in English and never in poetry since the fourteenth century". He

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1. Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, p. 142.

2. Ibid.

3. Sister Julie, op. cit., p. 317.

considers these poems to be the chronicle of the successive stages "of a man's growing consciousness of vocation and his entry into the religious state".<sup>1</sup>

F. X. Connolly, reviewing this second book of poems, proclaims that now Merton's poetry is not only important but importunate. He considers this "valuable contribution to the body of creative literature" worthy of the admiration, homage and gratitude of Catholics. Thomas Merton has framed our Christian "aspirations with accuracy, sincerity and power".<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Connolly and other critics agree that Merton's real inspiration derives less from sight than from insight. Thus when he moves into the sphere of mystical poet he achieves a freedom and a brilliant clarity not found in the "obscurity of his symbolism".<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Connolly ranks Merton's poems, "St. John Baptist", "Clairvaux", and "The Biography" among the best poetry of our century.<sup>4</sup>

The poet still has not reached the perfection of his art in this book. Dr. Connolly points up the less of

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1. Speer Strahan, "Thomas Merton: Poet", Ave Maria, vol. 65 (Feb. 22, 1947), p. 231.

2. F. X. Connolly, "Review of A Man in the Divided Sea, Spirit", vol. 13 (Nov. 1946) p. 50.

3. Dr. F. X. Connolly, op. cit., p. 50.

4. Ibid.

"tautness" and discipline found in "An Argument", where Merton is restrained by stricter pattern and regular rhythm. These are abandoned for a freer organization in later poems.

The "Man in the Wind", found also in this book, is a poem of stricter pattern and is a metaphysical poem, so difficult of comprehension that one is inclined to consider it personalized and individual and therefore without poetic value.

The mathematics of the air describes a perfect silence,  
 And Captain April's mind, leaning out of its own  
 amazing windows  
 Dies in a swirl of doves.

As a lyric poet, however, there is limpid beauty in his poems and in "Advent" lies symbolism neither obscure nor tortured, but charmingly inevitable.

Charm with your stainlessness these winter nights  
 Spies, and be perfect.<sup>1</sup>  
 Fly vividly in the fiery dark, you quiet meteors  
 And disappear.  
 You moon, be slow to go down  
 This is your full.<sup>2</sup>

The cadences of this poem and its form are reminiscent of the psalms of which the young convert so early became enamoured and which later filled his life with the magnificently simple music of the liturgy. This quality is found again in "Carol". The "Bombarded City" begins the

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1. Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, p. 17.

2. Ibid.

apocalyptic warnings developed in a later book.

Figures for an Apocalypse carries again the threefold thesis of all Thomas Merton's writing. Now this is done with an improved technique a "liberated art", "a more certain imagery".<sup>1</sup>

The first eight poems which together give the book its name are filled with the sadness of a mystic who is hurtling ruinward. The poet here uses the imagery of the Apocalypse and identifies New York with Ninevah and Tyre.<sup>2</sup> But he drives deep and these figures "twist in the mind like roots".<sup>3</sup>

In all the poems of this volume, the personal spiritual experience becomes identified with that of the twentieth century man in his crumbling civilization. The cries of his soul are no longer personalized and subjective. His experiences have true poetic depth so now he speaks with the tongue of universality bringing a subjective experience to an objective handling deeply poetic truths. And always it is the contemplative who speaks, who knows life's misery and its need of purging. In his first canto, the poet

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1. Fr. Sweeney, "Review of Figures for an Apocalypse" America, vol. 79. (June 19, 1949)

2. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, pp 13-28

3. Fr. Sweeney, op. cit.,

writes, identifying himself with those who await the Bridegroom:

For, from the beginning of the world  
 How few of us have heard the silver of Thy creed  
 Or paid our hearts for hours of emptiness  
 With gold of Thy belief.<sup>1</sup>

Even when he exhorts modernism to "fly, fly to the mountains", "fly, fly to the hills", warning that "the man in the silver garment" "strips down from heaven's temple door" and "raises the sickle" which begins "to sing like wind", in the most quiet harvest of the midnight world",<sup>2</sup> in the midst of all the apocalyptic fleeing it all suddenly come home to the poet's personal identical experience:

The first wild note begins to spring  
 And fires its anger, in an instant through the ranks  
 Of the attending angels  
 And bites my soul with lightnings live as steel.<sup>3</sup>

This personal identification with the woes and needs of his time appears even in his poem to our Lady, Canticle for the Blessed Virgin, to whom he appeals:

Lady, whose smiles are full of counsel and theology  
 Never have you withheld those seas of light  
 Whose surf confounds the keenest eye.  
 Grace me to be the soldier of your Scotus

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 13.
  2. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p.18-19.
  3. Ibid., p. 19.

Aiming my actions with the news  
Of your Immaculate command.<sup>1</sup>

The poems dedicated to the Fathers and theologians  
of the church identify action in guilt with his generation.

But we, a weak, suspicious generation  
Loving emotion, hating prayer,  
We are not worthy, of his (Duns Scotus) wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

The poem to the Desert Fathers touches the soul struggles of  
the contemplative, the mystic. To St. Jerome he writes:

You chide us with that language loud with fight  
Language of one who had to wrestle in the long night's  
wilderness  
With the wild angel, Revelation.<sup>3</sup>

To St. Paul the Hermit, he writes in a vein reminiscent of  
Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven:

Because God, God  
The One I hunt and never capture  
Opened His door, and lo, His loneliness invaded you.<sup>4</sup>

In the "Theory of Prayer" we find the three-fold  
dedication bound up as one. The poem begins with a repudi-  
ation of modern materialistic life, identified with "The  
City".

Not in the streets, not in the white streets  
Nor in the crowded porticoes  
Shall we catch you in our woods

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p.46.
  2. Ibid., p. 48.
  3. Ibid., p. 51.
  4. Ibid., p. 53.

Or lock You in the tenses of our Caesuras  
 You Who escaped the subtle Aristotle.<sup>1</sup>

Even this first stanza dips into metaphysics and apologetics.

Blinding is by Your evidence  
 Your too clear evidence. Your everywhere.<sup>2</sup>

From here the thought flows on to the sense of personal responsibility.

For the things that we utter turn and betray us  
 Writing the names of our sins on flesh and bone  
 In lights as hard as diamonds,  
 And the things we think have sold us to the enemy.

And our desires  
 Uncovering their faces one by one  
 Are seen to be our murderers.<sup>3</sup>

We find a trace of biography in lines such as:

Logic has ruined us  
 Theorems have flung their folly at us  
 Economy has left us full of swords  
 And all our blood is gone;<sup>4</sup>

Once again the personal mingles with the universal  
 as the poet reaches the mystical conclusion the final  
 assuaging of the woes of our contemporary civilization.

But all our thoughts lie still, and in this shipwreck  
 We'll learn the theory of prayer  
 How many hate your Cross,  
 Your Key, the only one

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p.71.
  2. Ibid., p. 71
  3. Ibid., p. 71
  4. Ibid., p. 71

To beat that last invincible door.  
 That will surprize us, Peace with Your invasion  
 And let us in those soundless fathoms where you dwell.<sup>1</sup>

In the final poem of this book, "The Poet, to his Book", Thomas Merton poses and answers the problem of the contemplative poet. He asks:

And will I wear you once again in Purgatory  
 Around my mad ribs like a shirt of flame?

But finding the answer in obedience and in the monk's tradere contemplata he sends out his book with the hope that the fruit of his contemplation may be passed on to those who, sharing his experience of sin and suffering, may also share his thirst for God.<sup>2</sup>

Go, stubborn talker  
 Find you a station on the loud world's corners  
 And try there (if your hands be clean) your length  
 of patience.  
 Use there the rhythm that upset my silences  
 And spend your pennyworth of prayer  
 There in the clamor of the Christless Avenues  
 And try to ransom some one prisoner  
 Out of those walls of traffic, out of those  
 wheels of that unhappiness.<sup>3</sup>

This book contains a further discussion of this problem in an Essay Poetry and the Contemplative Life. The problem already discussed by Bremond and Maritain from the

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1. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p.71.
  2. F.X. Connolly, "The Complete Twentieth Century Man", Thought, vol. 24, No. 29 (March 19, 1949) p. 14.
  3. Thomas Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 91.

poet's point of view is treated by Thomas Merton as a personal problem from the contemplative's point of view. This essay has caused considerable discussion in the literary world. The writer first describes the three degrees of contemplative life--natural contemplation of God--that of the artist, philosopher and of the most advanced pagan religions.

Active contemplation Merton considers to be the life of a baptized Christian making full use of all the means which the Church puts at his disposal.<sup>1</sup>

The third degree he describes as infused contemplation, the fulness of the Christian life. Contemplation, whether active or passive, writes Merton, "brings us into contact with the one subject matter that is truly worthy of the Christian poet. God as he is seen by faith, in revelations or in the intimate experience of the soul illumined by the gifts of the Holy Ghost". Merton believes that "no Christian poetry worthy of the name has been written by anyone who is not, in some degree a contemplative".<sup>2</sup>

The poet, then traces the influence of the poetic sense upon infused contemplation and the degree from the

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1. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life", Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 96.

2. Ibid., p. 99

poetic sense as a remote disposition for mystical prayer to genuine esthetic experience as a supra-rational intuition to the contemplation per speculum of St. Augustine and St. Bonaventure.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of the artist's preparation for infused contemplation, Merton writes:

And if God should grant that grace, the person so favored will be much better prepared to recognize it and to co-operate with God's action within him.<sup>2</sup>

Having arrived at "unitive or affective knowledge of God by infused contemplation, so Merton considers, the artist finds his poetic intuition "a fatal handicap". The artist enters himself to work, the mystic "to lose himself in the mystery and secrecy and infinite transcendent reality of God living and working with him".<sup>3</sup>

Merton believes that after this stage there is danger that the lower gift of artistic intuition and creation may rob the contemplative of the "infinitely superior gift of union of soul with God, which surpasses all understanding". Therefore while the artistic gift helps the soul "through that part of the journey of contemplation that is called

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1. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life" Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 103

2. Ibid., p. 104.

3. Ibid., p. 108.

Active", it may bar the way to the higher prayer. Merton remarks that "the sacrifice of an act would seem small enough price to pay for this pearl of great price".<sup>1</sup>

The publication of the Essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life", as an article in Commonweal, and later in Figures for an Apocalypse, brought several attempted answers to the question it proposed. Father Gervase Toelle, O, Carm., treated the question with a surprising lack of discrimination, having read it as a poet rather than as a contemplative and giving Father Louis credit for little religious understanding of his vocation or avocation. Father Eric Bruno, O.F.M., treated the question with more sympathetic understanding.

It is Sister Mary Therese, Lentfoehr, S.D.S., herself a poet and, one suspects, a contemplative, who meets the problem in a most satisfying manner. Wisely, she lets Father Louis answer the problem he himself has posed, by publishing in the Catholic World and Renaissance, hitherto unpublished parts of the manuscript of Seven Storey Mountain. The young monk describes how the writing he had heroically renounced, taken up once more, under obedience, became for him a practice in asceticism, a prayer, contemplation itself.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and The Contemplative Life, Figures for an Apocalypse, p. 109.

2. Thomas Merton, "Todo y Nada", Renaissance, vol. 2, N. 2 (Spring 1950) p. 100.

Sister Mary Therese adds to this article a comment showing deep insight into the poet's problem and its answer.

It would seem to be no inconsequential part of his (Merton's) personal apostolate to have brought his fellow poets up sharply against these issues and presented them a challenge to ponder and assess the status of their own gift against the dimensions of a more complete supernatural perspective.<sup>1</sup>

The words of Leon Bloy: "When those who love God try to talk about Him their words are blind lions looking for springs in the desert" inspired the title of Thomas Merton's latest book of poetry: Tears of the Blind Lions. The title leaves no doubt as to the subject of these poems. Nevertheless Thomas Merton's words are no longer "blind" lions but lit, now, with the clarity of that lucent darkness of his contemplation. The lions, however, according to Sister M. James Powers, S.S.N.D., roar and foam at the materialism of the day. Merton has now achieved a new articulateness. The poem "The Quickening of St. John The Baptist" speaks of the contemplative vocation in tones of lyric joy:

Cooled in the flame of God's dark fire  
Washed in His gladness like a vesture of new flame  
We burn like eagles in this invincible awareness.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Sister Mary Therese, "Todo y Nada", Renascence, vol. 2. no. 2, (Spring 1950) p. 101.

2. Thomas Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, p. 10.

Charles Francis Knauber, reviewing Tears of the Blind Lions, considers the poems in this volume a "re-emphasis of what Merton has been saying".<sup>1</sup> That is true in the sense that these poems are still a criticism of the materialism of modern life and the offering of prayer as the tonic to revitalize it in Christianity.

The Spiritual Biography continues to be woven through the texture of these poems as in the preceding volumes. The poet continues his studies; he becomes a theologian and philosopher. He shows the deep influence of Duns Scotus and gives the cause of the attraction in a poem to the great Franciscan theologian: "I open the book of Duns Scotus, to learn the reason of theology."<sup>2</sup>

"The Reader" may be considered one of the autobiographical poems for it describes a scene in the Monk's daily life. This is a strange poem building an atmosphere as well as a picture. Any religious will have been stirred by similar emotions as that which prompted this poem as the long line of prayer-absorbed monks "quicken" the sacred silence of the Monastery refectory. A similar atmosphere pervades "The Song", which has the lines:

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1. Charles Francis Knauber, "Review of Tears of The Blind Lions", Renascence, vol. 2, No. 2 (Spring 1950) p. 158

2. Thomas Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, p. 6

"Thus I live on my own land, on my own Island  
And speak to God, my God".<sup>1</sup>

Reviewer Charles Knauber writes with insight:

This is the poetry of prayer, the prayer that utters  
itself in the quiet abbey; the prayer that does not pray  
within the poem but outside it, in both the poet and the  
reader.<sup>2</sup>

Father Louis is supremely conscious of his vocation  
as poet of the contemplative life for he writes in "The  
Captives":

May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh  
If I forget thee, contemplation  
May language perish from my tongue  
If I do not remember thee, O Sion city of vision  
Whose heights have windows finer than the firmament.  
When night pours down her canticles  
And peace sings on thy watchtowers like the stars  
of Job.<sup>3</sup>

Writing in Spirit, Jose Garcia Villa considers that  
moderns have been seeking someone who will justify their  
experiments, the great poet of modernism, He does not agree  
that Yeats, nor Auden nor Spender nor even Eliot in spite of  
his Nobel Prize, nor Edith Sitwell, qualifies. When such a  
poet does arise he will unite what is best in the modern  
approach with what we have inherited from the past". Such a

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1. Thomas Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, p. 5.

2. Charles F. Knauber, "Review of Tears of the  
Blind Lions", Renascence, vol. 2, No. 2, (Spring 1950)

3. Thomas Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, p. 21.

poet will be intelligible, he will write powerfully and directly in "a liberated but understandable medium". Thus he will be "closer to the manner of the great Christian poets of the past ages than to any of the present day idols". Garcia believes that this great poet of modernism may be Thomas Merton.<sup>1</sup>

Will Lissner in "A Toast of the Avant Garde", writes of Merton and his poetry in its threefold character:

As a scourge of our times, as an evangel of the eternal life, that the Trappists try to live here in preparation for the hereafter, as a faithful chronicler of the cistercian spirit, Mr. Merton has given us a high earnest of his poetic achievement.<sup>2</sup>

In 1948, Harcourt, Brace, published Thomas Merton's biography Seven Storey Mountain, in England known as Elected Silence. Hubert Hart, who reviewed it in America, considers it "one of the most significant accounts of conversions from The Modern Temper to God, that our time has seen."<sup>3</sup>

Not only is this the realistic record of a complete twentieth century man, it is a book of varied interest but

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1. Jose Garcia Villa, "A Celebration for Edith Sitwell", Spirit, p. 177.

2. Will Lissner, "Toast of the Avant-Garde", Catholic World, vol. 166, (Feb. 1948) p. 424.

3. Hubert Hart, "Twentieth-Century Augustine", America, vol. 80, (Oct. 16, 1948) p. 47.

of simplicity of purpose. Thomas Merton is a poet, an artist an intellectual. His rich and colorful life he describes with a clear objectivity and vitality, that is fresh and inspiring. The descriptions of the places in which he lived "capture their respective genius loci".<sup>1</sup> "This biography gives us the world within men and the world without".<sup>2</sup> It is a document of universal humanistic value.

Apart from the lyric beauty of the prose descriptions and humanistic discussions, this autobiography carries a message that is at once a challenge to the modern intellectual, and a description and explanation of his life. That message is simple and insistent. "Grace is everywhere".<sup>3</sup> With this as thesis, Merton describes his climb up the Seven Storey Mountain of the steps of Grace from the amoral agnostic life of the intellectual sophisticate, to the contemplative life "enclosed in the four walls of (his) new freedom". Meanwhile he subjects the century to which he belongs to a critical scrutiny. As he himself reaches the mountain top of grace he offers to his "cruel century" the

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1. F. X. Connolly, "Review of Seven Storey Mountain, Catholic World, vol. 168 (Nov. 1945) p. 167.

2. F. X. Connolly, "The Complete Twentieth Century Man", Thought, vol. 24 (Mar. 1949) p. 10.

3. George Miles, "Review of Seven Storey Mountain," Commonweal, vol. 49, (Oct. 15, 1948) p. 16.

corrective of contemplative life.

Thomas Merton has written two biographies, Exile Ends in Glory, and What are These Wounds. Both of these are lives of Trappestines. One Mother Bertrand, was sent to revitalize the monastery in Cluna, in the last century. The other was a thirteenth century mystic, St. Lutgarde. As a biographer of women, even Trappestines, Merton is not so successful. The humanistic touch, the ability to recreate her genius loci and deep understanding of women is lacking in these books.

As treatises on the contemplative life they are beautiful. Merton writes with assurance and a lyric prose when he writes of the marvels of grace and the glories of contemplation. What are These Wounds explains the place of mystic experience above the natural order, in the spiritual life.

When Thomas Merton wrote The Waters of Siloe in 1949, he "made the history of the Cistercian Order become the spontaneous expression of high doctrine". It is quite in the order of development of the life he has lived and the spiritual vitality he offers his age in place of its materialistic sentimentality that the writer should follow up his thesis by an exposition of the Contemplative life as it is lived most purely by the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance.

Merton here writes beautifully and nobly of contemplation and activity, prayer and mortification, adoration and

abandonment. He still writes with the same incisive wit and without artificiality. He maintains objectivity and rarest honesty while writing with intensest love. He offers to uneasy moderns balanced judgment and real insight.

Finally in Seeds of Contemplation, Father Louis opens the way to contemplation, to the man in the world or in the cloister. Sister Mary Therese notes that this book is written after the extraordinary climb up the Seven Storey Mountain, at its summit of contemplation.

In Seeds of Contemplation, Father Louis proves that contemplation is for every man, the ordinary fulfilment of the Christian life of grace, man's highest function on earth, as it is his only occupation in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

So Thomas Merton in his books of poetry and prose, draws the complete twentieth-century man in his weakness and sin and then in his idealistic fulfilment. He exposes contemporary ills in the clear vision of his incisive criticism. His criticism is constructive, however, and Father Louis not only points out the panacea of our ills but leads the way to it. In his vocation as priest and preacher, he prays for the men of his age.

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1. Sister Mary Therese, "Review of Seeds of Contemplation", Renascence, vol. 1, (Spring 1949)

Memento Dei Genitrix  
Et miserere pauperum;  
Largire vitam mortuis,  
Ostende nobis Filium.

Emitte Sapientiam  
Da nobis Lumen cordium  
Dilectionis copiam  
Et gloriae primordium.

Gloria tibi Deitas  
Qui sempiternae caelitus  
Regnas, Pater et Filius  
Et utriusque Spiritus.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Thomas Merton, Seeds of Contemplation, p. 8.

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