

Communing with the stranger:

Relational dynamics and critical distance

between Thomas Merton and his readers

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accipite de mea paupertate quod habeo, ne tacendo philosophus puter.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *De Diligendo Deo: Praefatio*

Accept from my poverty what I have,

or I shall be thought a philosopher because of my silence.

Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God (Preface)*¹

¹ *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. by Gillian R. Evans (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 174.

ABSTRACT

Merton's monastic vocation was, amongst other things, a constructive response to perceived socio-political crisis. His writing and other works are, in the main, expression and extension of that overarching monastic practice, a movement from one socio-cultural location to another, then a persistent struggle to remain faithfully attentive and responsive to an approaching and present Christ. By remaining a monk and publishing into the milieu from which he departed, Merton's monastic witness became a form of public action which establishes an irreducible, creative tension for sympathetic readers who do not make an equivalent move. Combined with the interpersonal aspect of his writing, the tension is experienced as a type of relational dialectic. Merton's distinctive contribution to present-day theological discourse and faith praxis is bound up with this dialectic which extends from his sustained communicative action in the face of critical social conditions, rather than being found in attempts to systematize his 'scattered' theology or to distil propositional content from a multifaceted and fragmentary body of work. Interpretations of the trajectory of his life which imply that, at some point or in some way, Merton reversed or softened his secession from mainstream society by 'returning to the world' can undermine the capacity of the corpus to hold readers in the creatively expectant tension characteristic of Merton's historical witness and, more broadly, of openness to eschatological strands of a biblical counter-narrative of prophets, psalmody and Gospel that Merton mediates.

DEDICATION

In memory of Marjorie Ann Hall.

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INTRODUCTION

I never hated less the world, scorned it less or understood it better.
Because nothing is lost – (and therefore everything is in proportion) –
every act is seen in its context, and everything in the monastery is significant.
Because everything here is in a harmonious and totally significant context
(every face is turned to God – every gesture and movement is His).
Thus, everything in the world outside is also significant,
when brought into relation with this!

Thomas Merton, journal entry for 18 December 1941.¹

The words and examples of the Desert Fathers have been so much a part of
monastic tradition that time has turned them into stereotypes for us, and we
are no longer able to notice their fabulous originality. We have buried them,
so to speak, in our own routines, and thus securely insulated ourselves
against any form of spiritual shock from their lack of conventionality.

Thomas Merton, 1960.²

¹ Thomas Merton, journal entry for 18 December 1941, in *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 2, 1941-1952*, ed. and intro. by Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 4.

² *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 10.

a. Overview

Thomas Merton was a monk. He left behind a particular way of being in the world and a particular range of options, in order to occupy a contrasting social location. By writing back into the context from which he had departed, he became differently present to that original social milieu as an instance of a wholehearted and full-bodied determination to perform and communicate Christian counter-narrative. Merton's definitive movement derived its meaning, at least in part, from the socio-political circumstances in which it occurred.

Publication and widespread distribution of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, an autobiographical telling of that movement into monastic life, brought Merton to public prominence.³ It is as a monk that he became well-known and, whilst continually revising his understanding of monastic practice, he remained a monk of Gethsemani throughout his life. It was as a monk that he wrote; the published writings we now have are (with early exceptions) expression and extension of the singular monastic commitment and struggle. In light of Merton's clear concern for integrity, authenticity and undistracted devotion, it makes sense to consider his extant writing as the fruit or trace of an overarching monastic practice. His concern for integrity is evident in, for example, some of Merton's comments about the motives behind his compulsion to write, or the effects of his publishing.

Those of us who read Merton sympathetically whilst remaining embedded in the type of social structures and cultural milieu from which he sought to extricate himself, are exposed to the peculiar tension disclosed by his intensive version of radical Christian praxis. Which is not to say that Merton is the source of tensions experienced: rather, he acts as mediator or accompanist, drawing readers into the range of the kind of disruption which can occur

³ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1948).

through attentive encounter with a biblical world of prophets, psalmody and Gospel around which his monastic living was designed.⁴ The intricate and intimate detail of Merton's legacy works against any idealization of his struggling with monastic living, whilst drawing readers into that place of encounter through a distinctively informal, autobiographical style which (helped along by a highly active publishing industry) established Merton as a pivotal figure of twentieth-century Western Christian writing. Not infrequently, readers testify to impressions of interpersonal encounter arising from their reading of Merton. The informal detail, ephemera and autobiography contribute to a vivid sense of the author's life in process, and help establish trust between reader and author, whilst readers negotiate their own versions of the kinds of tensions that Merton describes, narrates, implies or evokes. The self-reflective, everyday, vernacular characteristics of Merton tend, at the same time, to distance him from the theological academy.

Amongst an array of published secondary writings, which long ago eclipsed the author's own extensive output, there are only a few book-length works which might be described by their authors as systematic theological treatments of Merton.⁵ This reasonably reflects Merton's aversion to a particular way of systematizing theological thinking which he found 'unnatural' when struggling in the late 1940s to produce a book on 'the dogmatic essentials of mystical theology'.⁶ Around universities, he keeps more natural company with professors

⁴ I describe him as a Virgil figure in 'Another Song From Nobody', in Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 197-198.

⁵ Notable amongst these are Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) and perhaps Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (London: University of Missouri Press, 2001). Patrick O'Connell's outstanding contribution to Merton scholarship, especially through his careful collating and editing of Merton's teaching notes, has brought before readers Merton's in-depth treatment of classical theological themes and sources.

⁶ This was Merton's description of what became *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), in a letter of 15 February 1949 to Sr Thérèse Lentfoehr (cited by William Shannon in *The Thomas Merton*

of English, American Studies or Religious Studies. Whilst some scholars have distilled propositional theological content from a corpus which does not naturally lend itself to such a project, others conclude that Merton is more of a 'religious personality' than a theologian as commonly understood by the academy.⁷ There is no general agreement about the nature of his contribution to present-day theological discourse. The issue has been approached from various directions, some writers choosing an overarching description of what Merton was producing (monastic theology, paradigmatic theology, existentialist theology, autobiographical theology and so on), some identifying a unifying theme (inclusive imagination, social criticism, seeking paradise, prophetic marginality, living with wisdom, monastic renewal, personalism and so forth), others a unifying characteristic of the author (discontent, authenticity, rebellion) or a persistent tension (silence and writing, world and monastery, withdrawal and engagement).⁸ More broadly, the secondary literature comprises commentary on and interpretation or analysis of particular writings and recordings; commentary on and re-telling of aspects, episodes or the overall trajectory of his life; memoir of those who knew Merton face-to-face or at a distance; testimony of those

Encyclopedia (2002), p. 11). Lentfoehr, author of *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1979) was a friend throughout Merton's monastic life. He described *Ascent* as 'unnatural' in a letter of 10 November 1967 to Jean Leclercq. He continues: 'I was trying to be academic or a theologian or something, and that is not what I am' (*School of Charity*, p. 352).

⁷ Christopher Pramuk, in his *Sophia*, writes that 'there remains a lingering perception in the academy that Merton studies pertain more to psychology or popular spirituality than to the dense theological tradition of the church' (p. 24). The chapter on Thomas Merton in the 2013 Ashgate introduction to *Key Theological Thinkers* begins with the statement that Merton is not a theologian 'in the strict sense' of one who produces 'important systematic-theological writings' but is, rather, a 'religious personality'; that is, one who inspires and enriches a religious tradition 'by means of works that are more similar to the works of a creative artist' (Hennig Sandström, 'Thomas Merton' in Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise, eds., *Key Theological Thinkers: From Modern to Postmodern* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013) pp. 715-723 (p. 715)). The unusual selection of Merton works identified as theological writing only illustrates the essay's conclusion that, for this author at least, 'it is not completely easy to place him in any theological tradition' (p. 723).

⁸ Titles in the bibliography illustrate these interpretative lenses or frameworks.

who have been influenced by his life and writing; overall assessment of his legacy and enduring appeal; and a variety of creative personal responses.

In 1954 Merton introduced writings on St. Bernard with the advice that we seek 'to understand St. Bernard's sanctity not merely by studying his history, but by perceiving something of its life-giving effect'.⁹ As Merton approached Bernard, so we might approach Merton. A focus on effect is, with regard to Merton, also a focus on types of relationality, and shifts emphasis from the distantly historical person as object of study or source of ideas, towards whatever is happening between Merton and his readers at the interface between our reception of inherited classical traditions, and perceptions of our relation to current social conditions.

As our reading of Merton might be guided by his introduction to reading Bernard, so it might also be guided by his introduction to reading the Bible: 'The modern reader is plunged into a field of conscious and unconscious tensions even before he opens the book',¹⁰ wrote Merton in an introductory essay produced late in 1967, in response to a request from Rabbi Abraham Heschel. He attributes the Bible's peculiar literary quality to the fact that 'the literary experience of the authors (hence too of the understanding reader) is more than literary. It is religious, sometimes even to the point of being "prophetic" or "mystical" or "eschatological"'.¹¹ As with the Bible, so with Merton, who, by including everyday, informal and relatively unprocessed material in his published output, reminds readers that 'prophetic and eschatological qualities of the experience are grounded in history and ordinary life'.¹²

⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1954), p. 27.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 16.

¹¹ Merton, *Opening*, pp. 16-17.

¹² *Opening*, p.17.

The extent to which readers participate with (rather than simply observe or analyse) Merton in a creatively dialectical, potentially transformative engagement with the sources he mediates, depends in part on the effect of our accumulated impressions of his 'ordinary life'.

It is this relational, dialectical aspect of engagement with Merton which has not yet been seriously studied as a distinctive contribution to constructive theological discourse and faith praxis. There is much to be gained from attending to what he continues to do with readers, as distinct from what he once did or wrote. The former is bound up with the latter, but my primary concern in this study is with what happens between readers and texts, between readers and the Merton we conjure from texts, rather than just with the content or internal dynamics of a literary corpus. I highlight Merton's monastic secession and immersion as his primary and enduring communicative action, establishing by his elected alterity an irreducible distance between the author-monk and readers who do not make an equivalent move. In this sense he is always to some extent a stranger to us, bringing to mind the strangeness of a biblical world and of eschatological Christian traditions incommensurable with aspects of our everyday worlds and attitudes. This distance combines with the more intimate sense of intersubjectivity to which sympathetic readers testify, an impression fostered especially by Merton's engaging style and the sheer volume of personal detail available. The ensuing creative tension between intimacy and distance, effected now by a remarkably multifarious body of literature, audio recordings and visual art, is characteristic of Merton's distinctive communicative praxis. When Merton's definitive monastic dislocation remains in view, a sense of intimacy and of distance coincide, and where we might be inclined to press towards intellectual resolution or premature closure, we can

instead abide with a sense of the author in whose person and world contrasting (and sometimes oppositional) streams of thought and meaning are brought together. Poetic, contemplative and political strata interact as readers enter into what can seem like interpersonal relationship, in which ‘communication is not merely a way to manage contradictions, but the very act of communication is understood as a contradictory process of meaning-making’.¹³

Victor Kramer noted how Merton’s raw journals (the ‘private’ journals published sequentially between 1995 and 1998) reveal, through their chronological development, an evolving craft not only ‘as a user of words; as an observer of himself’ but also ‘as someone increasingly aware of the relationship of his work to future readers in the years and decades to come’.¹⁴ Included in that consideration of future readers are his decisions and plans to make available or to distribute informal material of one kind or another. In this as in other decisions about publishing, he scrutinized his motives and imagined potential outcomes. In the end, Merton entrusted his legacy to unknown readers. This thesis is an attempt to honour that legacy by focusing on the relational heart of his mature theological practice; specifically, by attempting to discern how our present-day reception of Merton might be most consistently aligned with his lived practice and perspective, and continuous with his prophetic witness.

¹³ Leslie A. Baxter and Krista M. Scharp, ‘Dialectical Tensions in Relationships’, in *The International Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Communication*, First Edition (2016), <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic017>> [accessed 10 August 2018] (para. 2 of 11)

¹⁴ Victor A. Kramer, ‘“Crisis and Mystery”: The Changing Quality of Thomas Merton’s Later Journals’, in Patrick F. O’Connell, ed. and intro., *The Vision of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), p. 89.

b. The Thesis in Outline

The thesis begins with a survey of the body of literature from which readers derive impressions of the author-monk, his world and his work. Here I consider how elements of a potentially disorienting deposit of material are made available to present-day readers. I take account of how writings and recordings have been selected, compiled, categorized, presented and distributed, then take note of ways in which not only the work but the author-monk himself has been categorized and presented. Ways of categorizing reveal and influence modes of reception. I conclude (as have others) that the pole star by which we navigate the corpus is the fact of Merton's continuous monastic practice, of which all the work he produced or published after December 1941 is expression or extension.

The second chapter is a continuing survey of literature, with a particular focus on what secondary literature says about Merton's ongoing presence to readers. There are two strands here, one of which is Merton's presence amongst scholars. The second strand, largely overlooked in academic studies, is the phenomenon we can describe in broad terms as interpersonal engagement with Merton. I consider this distinctive mode by which the writer-monk's historical vocation extends into the present practice of readers, in light of clues from Merton about the relationship between his ways of communicating and his overarching monastic vocation.

Building on the first two chapters, the third includes consideration of, firstly, the validity and implications of relating to Merton in broadly interpersonal terms and, secondly, the necessarily subjective or partial nature of portrayals of Merton. The many perspectives on the single historical life-world are indications of a web of actual or potential interactions established around the author-monk whose work was and is a 'conduit of global intellectual-

historical crosscurrents' and much more.¹⁵ To refer to the many perspectives and portrayals as, for example, 'many Mertons' may undermine Merton's continuing work, by inadvertently collapsing creative tension or foreclosing interaction between perspectives. This point resonates with a theme I will pick up in the final chapter, about the effect of the preponderance of a particularly dominant model of the trajectory of Merton's life.

In the fourth chapter I pick up strands from Chapter One, and pursue the implications of encountering Merton first and foremost as a monk. Here I pay particular attention to Merton's reading of the socio-political and cultural undercurrents which shaped the meaning of his transition to monastic life. Merton consistently supports a reading of his pre-eminent communicative act (a dramatized movement from one setting to another) as a constructive, faith-based response to perceived social crisis, dehumanizing tendencies and outright conflict. It was a response which demonstrated the seriousness of his desire to deal with being implicated (as much as any other person) in the social conditions he inhabited. The battleground on which he engaged was chiefly that of language (shared and adopted meanings, modes of discourse, interpretations, proclamations, and so forth), as he became for readers a kind of counter-cultural presence or paradoxically discordant counterpoint. The body of work can continue to evoke creative tensions arising from Merton's actual move to a monastery, whilst potentially cultivating imagined and actual relationships consonant with the communion he envisioned and struggled to live.¹⁶ It is in this manner that Merton continues to work with readers in a many-layered mode of communicating, a

¹⁵ 'It is hard to think of a modern writer in the West whose work is a busier conduit of global intellectual-historical crosscurrents than that of Thomas Merton' writes Dennis McCort in his *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen, and Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 38.

¹⁶ In 'All Bystanders Now?' (*The Merton Journal* 24.2 (2017), pp. 3-13) I described this process in relation to Zygmunt Bauman's notion of 'communities of committed speech', from his essay 'From Bystander to Actor' (in Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 201-221).

‘contradictory process of meaning-making’ (Baxter and Scharp), building on traditions which cultivate or make room for personalist forms of interdependence and a critical unveiling of dehumanizing communicative practices. I suggest that the distinctive nature of Merton’s continuing contribution to the theological formation and faith practice of readers becomes apparent as we recognize his writing as expression and extension of an unremitting monastic secession, which is in turn a form of prolonged engagement (or ‘anti-engagement’) with social crisis, from beginning to end.

I further suggest that distinctive aspects of Merton’s continuing contribution to constructive theological discourse and faith praxis become more apparent when we attend to the nature of the interactions between readers and Merton, in relation to what he tells us about how his writing and publishing extend his monastic work. To that end, Chapter Five is structured around a late essay, ostensibly about symbolism, which I take as an indirect expression of how Merton aspired to communicate. This is to some extent speculative, and anything Merton has to say here about posthumous communicating is at best implicit. The essay is about contrasting modes of communication, one of which is characterized by a capacity or tendency to foster communion, a distinctive way of relating which he went on to highlight, notably, at the end of his life. The type of communicating Merton evokes does not prescribe, determine or persuade, but holds the attentive participant in proximity to prophetic, counter-cultural Judaeo-Christian traditions and patterns of meaning, always with the prospect that inadequate structures of meaning might give way to new, efficacious insight. Symbolism brings together (as Merton brings together) without always needing to

resolve, intellectually or affectively. This is not only about a coincidence of opposites¹⁷ or (in Dennis McCort's phrase) 'going beyond the pairs', but a more continuous confluence of an apparently eclectic and sometimes incommensurable variety of sources, ideas, traditions, experiences, vocabularies. Ultimately (and this is where the poetic is most clearly political) it is about the peaceable coming together of persons, in imagination and in practice, a coming together which anticipates the eschatological counter-narrative Merton re-presents.

The final chapter revolves around a key publication, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, from the same late period. There are three main reasons for arriving here. The first reason is simply that this is a book recommended as a way into Merton by, amongst others, his personal secretary, Br. Patrick Hart, OCSO. The second reason relates to the construction of *Conjectures*, a product of the author's re-reading and refiguring of his own notebooks and journals, more or less stripped of historical markers. The ordering of material, editorial method and introduction to the work together suggest ways of thinking about how elements of the wider corpus might combine in the imaginations and circumstances of readers. The third reason is that *Conjectures* includes a brief and overloaded passage which has disproportionately informed interpretation and reception of Merton in recent decades, arguably skewing both when its usage has collapsed a dialectical tension between separation and intimacy (or otherness and identification), effectively curtailing the type of interactivity on which the continuity of Merton's prophetic witness may rely. The phenomenon can hardly be avoided in the context of this thesis, even if I risk perpetuating a problem by drawing attention to the 'Louisville epiphany'. The *Conjectures* passage in

¹⁷ Pramuk deals with this theme in *Sophia*, pp. 81-86, drawing on Christopher Nugent, 'Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archaeology of Catholicity' in *Cistercians Studies* 26 (1991), pp. 257-70. He notes that there are only a 'few explicit references to the coincidence of opposites in Merton' (*Sophia*, p. 83).

question has often been cited as emblematic of a notable shift in direction or emphasis for Merton, even as signifying his 'return to the world'. I argue that the literature itself does not readily sustain such a reductive interpretation. Such readings of Merton's life - especially when described in progressive, developmental terms – can precipitate the collapse of a creative tension at the heart of his continuing prophetic work, by inadvertently privileging the reader's default reading site. Further, and more generally, an otherwise dynamic body of work is at risk of being ossified by any propensity to fix Merton within an interpretative framework constructed from the very categories and assumptions (for example, about the meaning of political engagement) that he resists and complexifies, whilst extending a curiously disarming hospitality, opening up a little space wherein we too might negotiate faithful responses to the stranger Christ. This is not a matter of whether Merton wrote more frequently or directly during his last decade about 'social issues' (he did, if 'social issues' means what it is commonly taken to mean), but about not losing sight of the fuller picture, the singular monastic commitment which I am reading as a form of sustained, faith-based (anti-)engagement with the causes and symptoms of a violent, dehumanizing culture whose logical outcome is war.

c. On Method

I have attempted throughout to interpret Merton in his own terms and in relation to some of the literature he was reading, concentrating especially on the last few years of his life. The first reason for focusing on the late period is that he was dealing more directly in the final few years with the theme of communication and thinking about future reception of his work. Secondly, by that stage, Merton had produced a large proportion of what is now available. If he was thinking about his literary legacy, then what he had in mind was the kind

of body of work we now know. Thirdly, in 1965 Merton was again moving from one form of social organization to a contrasting one, away from corporate routine and a teaching role as Master of Novices, to full-time eremitic living in a forest. The move has some resonance with his definitive transition to the monastery in 1941, whilst contrasting in ways which are not always helpfully described by the notion that Merton ‘returned to the world’.

From the late period I have then selected for special attention one essay (‘Symbolism: Communication or Communion’) and two key books (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *My Argument with the Gestapo*).¹⁸ Readers familiar with Merton will quickly point out that *My Argument* was in fact written in the main during the summer of 1941, and is therefore an early (pre-monastic) work. It was however not finally prepared for publication until 1968, and was published posthumously in 1969. This was one of Merton’s late projects, clearly important to him during his final year, and something that in 1968 he was keen to deliver to a reading public. In Chapter Four I consider why that might have been the case.

During two residential periods of research at the Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, I worked with variant manuscripts of *Conjectures* and *Argument*, and with Merton’s working notebooks, selected audio recordings and other unpublished material. At an early stage, this project was more focused on redaction, form and structure of these two books; but the process of working with the texts revealed a more pressing prior question about reception, which textual analysis alone was not going to answer. I became fascinated by, on the one hand, how Merton worked with his own writing and, on the other, the ways

¹⁸ ‘Symbolism: Communication or Communion?’ was first published in *Mountain Path* (India) in October 1966. The essay is in *Love and Living* ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 54-79. *Conjectures* was published by Doubleday in November 1966 and *My Argument* in 1969. The editions I have used (unless otherwise stated) are *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* New Edition (London: Sheldon, 1977) and *My Argument With the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1975).

in which I found him more vividly engaging when I refrained from distancing him through processes of either literary deconstruction or historical reconstruction. A kind of communication was happening via the interplay of texts, which would evaporate when the texts were flattened as chronological or thematic maps. There was also the initially frustrating, then gradually more intriguing fact that *Conjectures*, unlike *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Secular Journal* or *A Vow of Conversation*, includes almost no dates or other calendar references. Chronology and historicism are, to say the least, not major concerns in *Conjectures*, whose parts are put together ‘in such a way that they react upon each other’.¹⁹ I began to wonder how this principle might be extended to the full corpus, indeed whether Merton might be suggesting a way in which the fuller body of writing works on readers.

The practical problem I then faced was one of designing a manageable project to explore and develop the thesis. Despite advice I now know to be eminently sensible, I followed several interwoven strands of thought and material as the work took shape and ideas found form. In an attempt to echo something of Merton’s method, I have shaped each chapter around a core theme with the intention that the chapters sometimes ‘react upon each other’ whilst tracing a progressive argument. There is an element of spiralling in this progression, where for instance Chapter Four returns on another level to themes introduced in Chapter One. Ann Hunsaker Hawkins once described Merton’s conversion story in terms of *epektasis*, ‘where there are a number of crisislike episodes related to each other not in progressive stages but as widening or deepening circles’,²⁰ which also describes something of the production of this thesis. Constant movement towards what lies ahead, ‘in a

¹⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 6.

²⁰ Ann Hunsaker Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Autobiographies of Augustine, Bunyan and Merton* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), p. 140.

seemingly patternless road, from one step to the next',²¹ even a 'refusal ever to be content with or to rest at the point of arrival, but to treat every apparent arrival as an invitation to further growth and stretching out' is not just about the disposition of the researcher, but something about Merton, and about what he does with readers. It is because of this continuous 'seeking, never fully achieving, yet never ceasing from the seeking'²² that talk of completeness or wholeness can be problematic in relation to Merton, despite 'something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness and finality'.²³ This thesis also feels far from complete, but I hope the work presented here will help keep the spiralling conversation around Merton focused on what mattered most to him. The literature cited and themes highlighted in what follows are selected from a wide-ranging survey of Merton's writing and recordings, and of writing about Merton. Throughout, I have paid particularly close attention to his personal journals, which have served as a guiding framework. I have taken account of all serious (and some popular) secondary literature in English, and searched volumes of *The Merton Annual*, *The Merton Journal* and *The Merton Seasonal* up to 2018 for clues about how readers engage with Merton's historical monastic witness.²⁴

The privilege of leading study days and contributing to conferences in the UK, US and Germany, as well as two periods as co-editor of *The Merton Journal*, have multiplied opportunities for engaging with many Merton readers throughout. As has work with student

²¹ Anthony Meredith, *The Cappadocians* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), p. 70, followed by a quotation from p. 77.

²² This is the editor's explanatory addition to a letter of 6 June 1959 to Herbert Mason, who first interested Merton in Louis Massignon, Merton wrote 'I especially like P. Danielou's chapter on *epectasis* [seeking, never fully achieving, yet never ceasing from the seeking] in the book on Gregory of Nyssa (still his best)' (*Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 261-62 (p. 262)).

²³ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1955), p. 124. The poetic translation which is 'Wholeness' in Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 105-06, is appropriately mystifying on the subject. The one whose 'spirit is entire' is a drunken man who falls out of a wagon.

²⁴ See the following chapter for bibliographic detail.

ministers at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham, where Merton surfaced for undergraduate courses on autobiographical theology, which I designed and led.

Although this study is largely about faith practice, it is essentially a literary study rather than, say, a qualitative study of reader responses to Merton. I tested the prospects of a qualitative approach through the undergraduate courses, and that work with student ministers was informative and stimulating. However, it led away from my primary interest in the relationship between Merton's faith practice and that of readers already sympathetically engaged with him. So I decided instead to make use of published accounts of responses to Merton. My own reading of Merton is greatly influenced by numerous scholars, biographers, researchers, poets and archivists, and by the generous hospitality, wisdom and friendship of some of Merton's flesh-and-blood friends and confrères.

CHAPTER 1: NAVIGATING THE MERTON CORPUS

Blake's teaching is a theology, a politics, an aesthetics, a morality, a philosophy, a sociology. Yet in making these divisions [...] I am already beginning to falsify the essence of his truth. To divide, to methodise, to analyse, to classify: are not these the very things against which Blake protested? Alas, yes. But the dilemma is unavoidable. To see Blake's truth we must divide it; but to understand we must again unite. Let it be remembered that these divisions and generalisations are purely technical – indispensable but distorting devices for the discussion of any subject. And let it be remembered too that the essence of Blake's teaching is to be found not only in the long 'prophetic books' but in those brilliant flashes of insight, those 'logoi spermatikoi' which are his lyrics.

Bernard Blackstone, *English Blake*, 1949.¹

I found in writing *The Ascent to Truth* that technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience. Since my focus is not upon dogmas as such, but only on their repercussions in the life of a soul in which they begin to find a concrete realization, I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul.

Thomas Merton, 1953.²

¹ Bernard Blackstone, *English Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1949). On Blake's influence on Merton, see especially Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1998).

² Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p.18.

1.1 The Scope and Nature of the Corpus

David Belcastro, in his '2009 Bibliographic Review: Beneath the Habit of Holiness'³ referred back to a review essay in *The Merton Annual* commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Merton's death. In that 1993 essay, Michael Downey echoed Dominican Richard Weber's concern: 'Where is the point when publishing anything he wrote begins to cheapen his true reputation? Will we have, next year perhaps, the new Merton book: *Whiter and Brighter: The Laundry Lists of Thomas Merton?*'⁴ Since before Merton's death in 1968, an unwieldy corpus has been sifted, filtered, summarized, re-packaged and re-presented through an active publishing industry, assisted by researchers and bibliographers, chroniclers and biographers, interpreters and editors. The researcher interested in ways of reading Merton is immediately faced with the question of how to deal with the sheer volume of literature and other media. Michael Mott, acknowledging the privileged access to restricted material afforded him in his role as official biographer, noted in 1984 the array of Merton writings already generally available at that time, including some fifty books. Eighteen years later, the authors of *The Merton Encyclopedia* referred in their introduction to a letter of 11 June 1968 to the researcher James Baker, in which Merton expresses some surprise that Baker had come across fifty books and pamphlets by Merton. 'He would be even more surprised to know that the authors of this encyclopedia have discovered that the number of books he wrote is more than double the fifty noted by Baker.'⁵

³ *The Merton Annual*, Vol.23 (2010), pp. 240-259.

⁴ Michael Downey, 'Critical Turn Ahead!: 1992 in Merton Scholarship and Publication', in *The Merton Annual* Vol. 6 (1993), pp. 194-202 (p. 194) citing Richard Weber in *Spirituality* 44/2 (Summer 1992) p. 200.

⁵ William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), p. xvi. Baker's research became James Thomas Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971). On 10 June 1968 June Yungblut wrote to Merton: 'Thirty-six books plus innumerable articles! You really must stop writing if you're to be read in your entirety – unless you want to become a continent unto yourself in which there is room for so much research that an

Even the number of Merton books is hazy. Whilst the creators of the *Encyclopedia* refer to more than a hundred, the compiler of the Merton bibliography, *More Than Silence*, referred a few years later to ‘a vast and growing legacy based on some 80 works in more than two dozen languages’.⁶ The apparent inconsistency is about different ways of counting, and different notions of what constitutes a (new) Merton book. During his lifetime Merton oversaw the publication of thirty-nine books, including a *Reader*, and two books published shortly after his death in December 1968: *My Argument with the Gestapo* and *The Geography of Lograire*.⁷ By 1985, forty-six Merton books were published, including *The Collected Poems*, and *The Asian Journal*, constructed from Merton’s notes and transcripts of talks given during his final journey. Some posthumous books were planned or foreseen by Merton, whilst many others have been planned, compiled and edited only after his death – a distinction I have tried to make in the bibliography to this thesis (and not without problems), for reasons outlined in this chapter. The edges of my categories are hazy: I have, for instance, included *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *A Thomas Merton Reader* as books Merton anticipated or helped to shape.⁸ *Monks Pond* is also included as a book he planned, even though it was a quasi-periodical, a literary forum, an anthology of work by

aging and wearied explorer like myself can get lost, eaten by crocodiles – or discover a golden city’ (in Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1984), p. 511.

⁶ Patricia A. Burton, *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. xiii.

⁷ *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962); *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969). Other compilations produced during Merton’s lifetime include, for example, *Selected Poems by Thomas Merton*, ed. and intro. by Robert Speaight (London: Hollis and Carter, 1950).

⁸ *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971).

many writers.⁹ Merton created it and the book form is simply a bringing-together of the four editions produced.

Merton reconfigured or re-wrote pieces he had produced earlier, so several works published during his lifetime include a proportion of previously-published material.¹⁰ In terms of genre, there are 'journals, poetry, letters, collected meditations, essays on a wide variety of subjects from spiritual searching to prophetic polemics on war and peace, in addition to forms such as interpretive translations and rearrangements'.¹¹ In 1985 the first of five published volumes of selected letters appeared; the last of these coincided with publication in seven volumes of Merton's personal journals between 1993 and 1998.¹² Major publications were still to come: *The Inner Experience* appeared in 2003; the 'banned'

⁹ *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, ed. and intro. by Robert E. Daggy (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989).

¹⁰ A good example of this is the inclusion in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) of about half of *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

¹¹ Burton, *Silence*, p. xiii.

¹² Five compilations of Merton's letters were published during the decade from 1985 onwards, all by Farrar, Straus and Giroux of New York: *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (1985); *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (1989); *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. by Patrick Hart (1990); *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (1993); *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. by William H. Shannon (1994). The personal journals were all published by HarperSanFrancisco: Patrick Hart, ed., *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 1, 1939-1941 (1995); Jonathan Montaldo, ed., *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 2, 1941-1952 (1995); Lawrence Cunningham, ed., *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 3, 1952-1960 (1996); Victor A. Kramer, ed., *Turning Toward The World: The Pivotal Years*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 4, 1960-1963 (1996); Robert E. Daggy, ed., *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 5, 1963-1965 (1997); Christine M. Bochen, ed., *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 6, 1966-1967 (1997); Patrick Hart, ed., *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 7, 1967-1968 (1998). Merton's monastic journaling began in earnest after completing the retrospective work which became *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In 'The Scribe's Introduction' (pp. xiii-xvii) to *Entering the Silence*, Jonathan Montaldo writes that Merton 'began writing a new journal on December 10, 1946, timed to mark the fifth anniversary of his arrival at Gethsemani's gate'. In January 1950 he mentioned to a friend that he was typing up the journal with a view to publication, under the working title of *The Whale and the Ivy* (p. xvi).

Peace in the Post-Christian Era followed in 2004, and *New Selected Poems* in 2005.¹³ The Merton Legacy Trust had overseen a twenty-five year embargo on the private or 'raw' journals, the lifting of which released a different aspect of Merton into the public realm, stimulating fresh interest. They contain the seeds of many ideas for published essays and books, which mingle with reflections and insights into the circumstances and the situations from which the published works emerged. Those edited and prepared works had already revealed to some extent the complexity of developments in his thought, the ebb and flow, the ways in which he would return on another level to a theme he had considered previously, often having tried out ideas with correspondents or other readers, whose responses informed his re-writing.¹⁴ What we get in the private journals, and more so in about four hundred hours' worth of audio recordings (across about six hundred recordings), are asides, moments of thinking out loud or of unprocessed comments unlike Merton's carefully-prepared formal publications. The private journals bring readers into the midst of the author's less guarded commentary, ephemeral moods and passing thoughts. They also convey more forcibly the sheer range of interests and streams of thought which passed through this one consciousness. The overall effect can leave readers disoriented or overwhelmed, not unlike the way in which some confrères experienced Merton in the flesh:

The contradictions, ambiguities, inconsistencies, misplaced enthusiasms, or just too much enthusiasm, were Father Louis. In part, they hid the depths of the person, and in another sense showed the reality of the very human person. But over the long term it was difficult to respond to all his enthusiasms, for us lesser souls cannot hold so much

¹³ *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. and intro. by William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003); *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. and intro. by Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. and intro. by Lynn Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005).

¹⁴ See Matthew Kelty's recollection of this process, in Appendix 1.

divergent material in a living form. Father Louis sometimes had to be not considered just in order that we might have space to live and also that he might have space.¹⁵

Faced with the abundance of everyday detail and personal musings which pack the journals, a committed reader may reach a similar conclusion; at which point and in the face of over-publishing and promotion, it is worth remembering that Merton does not impose or insist (whatever ambition he may have harboured during episodes of his life). Rather, he has made available an unsurpassed collection of detailed inscriptions and audio recordings of a particular consciousness seeking God, seeking to live an authentically Christian life in a mid-twentieth-century American context of crisis. Later in his life, Merton did little to hide his workings, his work in progress, his preoccupations, misreadings, limitations or apparently unseemly behaviour. He wished certain things had not been published or even written, but was not concerned, late in life, with ensuring that only his most impressive work should be available. His corpus is testimony to an author open to judgement, and to interaction with his continuous effort to inhabit and perform a radical Christian counter-narrative. The legacy is in our hands, and what we make of it may revolve around such factors as the extent to which we trust the author.¹⁶

Of the more than 'fifteen thousand pieces of correspondence to over 2,100 correspondents' in the archive of the Merton Center at Bellarmine University, some are vibrant with the immediacy of his personal journals whilst others are more measured,

¹⁵ Timothy Kelly, 'Epilogue: A Memoir', in Patrick Hart, ed., *The Legacy of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 217-225 (p.222).

¹⁶ Rowan Williams in his *Tokens of Trust* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2007) describes how belief in God can begin 'from a sense that [...] we trust some kinds of people. We have confidence in the way they live; the way they live is a way I want to live, perhaps can imagine myself living in my better or more mature moments. The world they inhabit is one I'd like to live in' (p. 21).

carefully attentive to the wider public he anticipated would one day be reading them.¹⁷ The five major compilations, along with a growing number of other publications of selected correspondence, perhaps more than any other works, offer readers the vicarious impression of direct and personal communication from Merton.¹⁸ One review of a short collection of Merton's letters says:

There is something about the fact that a word of encouragement, an observation about the spiritual life or a reflection on the nature of God and of faith, was originally part of a personal exchange and had its context in a relationship, which adds an extra dimension to the words reproduced in print for a different audience.¹⁹

Merton could write differently in letters, not only because he had in mind a particular person and their concerns or interests, but also because his letters, unlike writing intended for publication, did not need to pass through censors. The editor of the collection to which this review refers hoped that the peculiar intimacy and informality of an exchange between particular persons might help establish further connections between ourselves as unknown readers and – whom? We cannot communicate with Merton in any ordinary sense, and yet readers testify to a sense of connectedness. Merton's letters, according to William Shannon and Christine Bochen 'reveal aspects of his character and thought that do not appear, at

¹⁷ This figure is specified at <<http://merton.org/collection.aspx>> [accessed 07/07/2014]. Some letters from Merton are held in other collections or private ownership. David Joseph Belcastro put the number at over 20,000 in 'Thomas Merton: American Monk, Artist and Social Critic' in *Theological Librarianship* Vol.7 No.2, July 2014, pp. 31-44 (p. 32).

¹⁸ Subsequent publications have included both sides of a correspondence between Merton and various others, such as in *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* ed. and intro. by Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY, 1995); *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, ed. and intro. by David D. Cooper (London: W. W. Norton, 1997); *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. and intro. by Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). In a different category is the correspondence which Merton himself sought to have published, eventually produced as *Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, A Catch of Anti-letters* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1978)

¹⁹ Helen Burn, review of Fiona Gardner, ed., *Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2011), in *The Merton Journal*, Vol. 19 No. 1, Eastertide 2012, p. 43. On the title of this collection, the reviewer commented that 'There is nothing sweet about Merton: he is tough, robust, sinewy, bracing, offering no easy comfort. "Small grenades for daily lobbing" might have summed the book up better than "precious thoughts"' (MJ 19.1, p. 44).

least not with the same clarity and personal touch, in his published works'.²⁰ They conclude that letter-writing more than any other form extended Merton's monastic vocation. In support of this, they cite a letter to Pope John XXIII in which Merton, in November 1958, wrote:

as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world [...]. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I have also to think in terms of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic, and social movements in this world [...]. In short, with the approval of my Superiors, I have exercised an apostolate – small and limited though it be – within a circle of intellectuals from other parts of the world, and it has been quite simply an apostolate of friendship.²¹

For Merton, 'letters were not just a vehicle for exchanging information but a way to initiate, maintain, and deepen relationships'.²² It is reasonable to assume that Merton is connecting his 'apostolate of friendship' specifically with letter-writing; but it may be equally true that other writings contributed to that same apostolate. The editors conclude their introduction to the collection with an image of 'Merton's letter writing as an upward spiral – creating an ever-widening circle of contacts and relationships'.²³ The widening continues, but effected not just by personal letters: 'circular letters', contributions to magazines and newspapers, unofficial productions such as *Monks Pond*,²⁴ mass-market publications or any combination of elements of a multifarious corpus can generate this effect.

²⁰ William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, 'Introduction' to *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), pp. vii-xiv (p. x).

²¹ Shannon and Bochen, pp. xi-xii.

²² *Life in Letters*, pp. xii-xiii.

²³ *Life in Letters*, p. xiv.

²⁴ The literary magazine, edited by Merton, of which four issues were printed, is published as *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton's Little Magazine*, ed. and intro. by Robert E. Daggy (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989). Letters which circumvented censors, to be circulated amongst friends, were published as *Cold War Letters*, ed. and intro. by Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

With a contrasting perspective on Merton as letter-writer, Robert Daggy described Merton's 'ambivalence about writing letters', an ambivalence which:

extended to all his correspondents, including at times his oldest and closest friends. His saying he was too busy, his complaining that he received too much mail, his insisting that he did not have time to answer – all became a litany, a frequent and boring recitation, with which he began, and also sometimes ended, nearly all his letters.²⁵

Nevertheless Merton 'demonstrates in his letters to young people a quality which Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr dubbed "delicate compassion"'.²⁶ In other words, the correspondence reveals perhaps most acutely a tension between Merton's desire for solitude and his instinct for relationship. Feelings of frustration or overwhelming are expressed not just in relation to letters, but sometimes more generally about taking on too many writing projects.

The authors of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* suggested that the publication of selected letters and private journals had by and large 'brought to a conclusion the publication of major Merton works – at least the major works that would interest a general readership'.²⁷ Previously unpublished writing has nevertheless continued to appear in print. Pointing to the 'long comet's tail of posthumous publication and the growing array of selections chosen and edited by others', Patricia Burton highlighted another major project in the pipeline as she introduced her bibliography in 2008; namely, publication of 'teaching notes from Merton's years as novice master, teacher and lecturer in his monastery'.²⁸ The first volume of the 'Initiation into the Monastic Tradition' series appeared in 2004 and the

²⁵ Robert E. Daggy, 'The Road to Joy: Thomas Merton's Letters to and About Young People' in M Basil Pennington, ed., *Towards An Integrated Humanity* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), pp. 52-73 (p. 53).

²⁶ Daggy, 'Road to Joy', p. 57.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia*, p. xvi.

²⁸ Patricia A. Burton, *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton*, ATLA Bibliography Series No.55 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), p. xiii.

ninth is due in the Spring of 2019,²⁹ collated and edited by Patrick O’Connell, one of the authors of the encyclopaedia, in which he implied that the teaching notes may not interest a general readership, though they add significantly to our appreciation of Merton’s scholarship and commitment to the teaching task. Audio recordings of conferences and classes complement the notes, and reveal a stark contrast between what Merton carefully prepared on paper, and what happened when engaging with people in the flesh.³⁰ The same kind of contrast is evident in relation to Merton’s Asian talks at the end of his life, a contrast which reminds readers that any sense of person-to-person interaction derived from the literature is a phenomenon we cannot assume to be like Merton’s actual face-to-face interactions.

There are sketches, photographs, calligraphies and a library of annotated books.³¹ Merton’s prolific output reveals not only the panoramic sweep of his interest in the world at large, but also his extraordinary attention to capturing and communicating details of his existence in relation to his environment, to other people and to God. Previously-unpublished primary material has continued to appear in *The Merton Annual*, *The Merton Journal* or in new books. It is as though Merton continues to give us more, an effect amplified by the way in which, through the *mélange* of literary forms, Merton demonstrates rather than simply describes how ideas, perceptions and art evolve. Via journals, letters and

²⁹ *Cassian And The Fathers*, Initiation into the Monastic Tradition, ed. and intro. by Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2004); and *Medieval Cistercian History*, Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 9, ed. and intro. by Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2019).

³⁰ A note on transcribing Merton introduces the bibliography.

³¹ Burton writes: ‘With the publication of Roger Lipsey’s *Angelic Mistakes* in April 2006 we have the first book that fully explores Merton’s drawings and what he called “calligraphies.” His drawings and photographs have been used to decorate many of his books, often without credit’ (*Silence*, p. 81). Each edition of *The Merton Annual*, since its first appearance in 1988, has been decorated with a different Merton ‘calligraphy’.

audio recordings, or variant editions of a book like *(New) Seeds of Contemplation*,³² or in the links between raw journals and processed works, readers can discover what seem more like traces of a lived performance of faith and theology than a recollection of or commentary on the same.

1.2 Editing, Compiling and Mapping Merton

At the turn of the millennium, as the corpus available to regular readers continued to expand, editors of the *Encyclopedia* set about trying ‘to organize it into some workable, user-friendly form.’³³ Together with collectors, archivists, editors, biographers, bibliographers and interpreters they have helped make Merton more accessible and manageable. With no agreed canon (and good reasons for not seeking one), readers wondering where to begin with Merton can also find numerous introductory books, commentaries, biographies, evaluations and compilations which one way or another determine reception of Merton. Examples include two contrasting versions of ‘essential writings’ which in turn differ markedly from the *Reader* which Merton himself helped to construct.³⁴ Letters and personal journal material hardly feature in these compilations, though either category might be an appropriate or preferred starting point. Indeed, there is

³² This development is traced with meticulous detail in Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, Toronto Studies in Theology 20 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984).

³³ *Encyclopedia*, p. xvi.

³⁴ Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) and Christine Bochen, *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) are not only organized in very different ways but contain strikingly different selections. Jonathan Montaldo, in a review of Fiona Gardner’s *Precious Thoughts* (*The Merton Annual* 26 (2013), pp. 216-220) recalled how ‘Robert Giroux, during his tenure as a trustee for the Merton Legacy Trust, often voiced his disapproval to fellow trustee Anne McCormick and Tommie O’Callaghan of what he called “fabricated books” that were put together by editing selections or excerpts from across Merton’s writing. He disliked these “re-packagings” because he judged these collections threatened to deflect from the integrity of Merton’s presentation of himself and his ideas in the more complete context of the books he had actually written for publication in his lifetime’ (p. 216). Montaldo concedes that Giroux ‘would not have called “fabricated” *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* or Patrick O’Connell’s recent edition of Merton’s *Selected Essays*’ (pp. 216-217), though how the latter is a different format is unclear.

an ‘essential collection’ of letters (mentioned above), selected from the five volumes already selected and organized. In a similar vein, a single volume has been distilled from the seven published volumes of private journals. Poetry is included in the *Reader* that Merton oversaw, but not in the other compilations mentioned above. Merton was first published as a poet, but it is rare to find readers introduced to Merton through his poetry. One carefully-arranged selection of poems is designed to help readers navigate ‘with Merton through the themes that were most important to him’ – according to this editor, at least.³⁵ In general, editors have always played an influential role in shaping Merton’s public presence. Burton wrote of ‘one of the most-edited authors of his century’ that:

it began with Evelyn Waugh’s edit of *The Seven Storey Mountain* even before it was first published. His early death left unfinished projects which were carried out by friends, and a large amount of primary material whose preparation for publication by other editors has taken decades. We can also recognize that what he originally published is now at the center of a number of concentric circles, the outermost being the publication of books of excerpts from Merton’s writings by other editors, an activity that has only grown with the years.³⁶

Usable maps and guides, along with well-written biographies, assist the reader faced with this complex and extensive body of work. The problem with mapping, as Baudrillard vividly argued about the precession of simulacra, is that the map can ‘precede the territory’.³⁷ The model can precede what it models. So an editor or publisher’s evaluation of what constitutes Merton’s ‘essential writings’ can actually become, for the new reader wanting guidance or a shortcut, Merton’s essential writings. The determining criteria are rarely made explicit. Where the literature and the author’s projected persona intermingle to the extent they do in Merton, the channelling of his work can come close to interpreting a life; and the

³⁵ Kathleen Norris, in Lynn Szabo, ed., *In the Dark Before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 2005), p. xvii.

³⁶ Burton, *More Than Silence*, p. xv.

³⁷ Jean Baudrillard, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

establishing of selected 'essential work' can inadvertently become the fixing of a version of the person or the trajectory of his life. I address this particular issue in the final chapter.

1.3 Prioritizing, Categorizing and Evaluating Elements of the Corpus

In her outstanding bibliography, Burton addresses the reader's need for arranging works as either prose, poetry, letters, edits, Merton's translations of other authors, visual arts and his contributions to other books. These are overlapping categories, to which Burton adds 'selections' and 'composites'. Rare books (include limited editions of '18 Poems' and 'Tom's Book', which is a book about rather than by Merton) have their own category.³⁸

Notwithstanding its functional value, categorization is a particularly fraught matter with an author whose prose and poetry, or journalism and pensées, or formal and informal works, blend and blur to the point of indistinction. Even a brief survey of Burton's bibliography reveals the extent and complexity of the extant Merton corpus. The problem extends beyond the issue of categorization, into the arguably more hazy matter of prioritizing. Burton notes the failure of bibliographies to indicate 'how a particular book fit with the whole', giving as example the back of *Reflections on My Work*, a collection of Merton's international prefaces, where titles are listed chronologically 'with nothing to tell the casual reader that *Devotions in Honour of St John of the Cross* (1953) (a now vanishingly rare pamphlet) is of any more or less importance than *The Ascent to Truth* (1951) and *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), which surround it in the list'.³⁹

³⁸ Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985) was published in a limited edition of 250. Ruth Merton and Sheila Milton, ed., *Tom's Book: To Granny with Tom's Best Love 1916* (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2005).

³⁹ Burton, *Silence*, p. xv. Burton refers to Robert E. Daggy, ed., '*Honourable Reader*': *Reflections on My Work* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), with a checklist bibliography on pp.155-168.

Burton's point could be addressed with brief descriptions of works, their provenance, distribution and reception; but further questions about the relative importance of particular works are bound up with the context of their production or reception. In relation to the present thesis, which is in part about how readers derive impressions of Merton, any of the traces he left may be significant and influential. If we want to prioritize, Merton had his own favourite books, and stated (occasionally fluctuating) opinions about the value of each. For instance, in a preface addressed to the book itself, Merton wrote in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (1966) that: 'I do not repudiate the other books. I love the whole lot of you. But in some ways, *Raids*, I think I love you more than the rest.'⁴⁰ Do we give the book more attention because it was a favourite of Merton's, or do we learn something about Merton in 1966 simply because he described this book at the time as a favourite?

Around eighteen months later, on 6 February, 1967, with thirty books in print, Merton listed some of his works in a private journal with the comment that he 'would be much better off if [he] had published only these'.⁴¹ The books are, in this order and as Merton describes them: *Thirty Poems*, *Seven Storey Mountain*, *Seeds of Contemplation*, *Tears of Blind Lions*, *Sign of Jonas*, *Silent Life*, *New Man*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *Wisdom of Desert*, *Disputed Questions*, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Seeds of Destruction*, *Chuang Tzu*, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, *Raids on Unspeakable*, *Conjectures of a G[uilt]y B[y]stander*.

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 6, 1966-1967*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 194. William Shannon picks up Merton's response, recorded in a reading journal entry for 18 December 1965, to a sentence by Rilke about good art springing from necessity. Against this criteria Merton lists, as 'necessary' and therefore art, his *Way of Chuang Tzu*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, some poems in *Emblems of A Season of Fury*, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude' (in *Disputed Questions*, pp. 177-207), *Sign of Jonas*, *Seven Storey Mountain*, *Thirty Poems* and perhaps 'the writing on Zen' and 'some of *Behavior of Titans*' (which became part of *Raids on the Unspeakable*).

Seeds of Destruction is inserted afterwards, followed by a question mark. Merton comments that fifteen books is 'plenty. But yet the others too – some of them – had something in them that had to be got out of my system I guess.'⁴²

The author's own prioritizing need not be our own, which is determined by purpose and intention. The *Reader* gives some indication of the writings which Merton, around five years earlier, 'sharing to some extent' in the selection made and arranged by Thomas P.

McDonnell, considered representative as 'a summing up of twenty-five years of thought'.⁴³

In the preface, Merton noted that much 'spelled out in later books and articles is already implied in *The Seven Storey Mountain*',⁴⁴ the seminal work which created an 'artificial public image' (p. ix) and was then still 'apparently considered most representative of its author' (p. ix). In other words, *Mountain* has been perceived as a major, even classic, work, but for several good reasons is not the best place for readers to first encounter Merton. Its reception at particular times and places generated a problematic public image which persists, sometimes constituting a fixed point by which later works and events (such as the pseudo-event discussed in Chapter Five below) would be evaluated. Present-day readers can work more flexibly with chronology of publication and real-time responses to Merton, as he himself dealt more flexibly with chronology in *Conjectures* (see Chapter Six). Before, or instead of, reading *Mountain*, we can go directly to the 'more articulate statements – or perhaps more cryptic ones, like *Atlas and the Fat Man*'.⁴⁵ Other essays and prose poems are, according to the author, more mature expressions of what was implied in the early

⁴² *Learning to Love*, p. 194. See my bibliography for details of these publications.

⁴³ Merton, 'First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface' in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. vii-xii (p. vii).

⁴⁴ 'First and Last Thoughts', p. vii.

⁴⁵ 'First and Last Thoughts' in *Reader*, p. vii.

autobiography. A new reader might begin with these, or with *The Sign of Jonas*, which, according to the author, ‘communicates something that could never be said in any other way’.⁴⁶

Another way of organizing material is by historical period, as Merton does in the *Reader*, at the same time cutting across periodization and other ways of categorizing as he reflects on a life ‘almost totally paradoxical’ and contradictory, in which he found peace because he has ‘always been dissatisfied’.⁴⁷ The dissatisfaction had helped the author ‘to move freely and even gaily with the stream of life’ as ‘unspoken (or spoken) protests [kept him] from clinging to what was already done with’.⁴⁸ We are left with the impression that we are reading a residual trace of a lived process, which takes precedence over writing as product.⁴⁹ That process involves movement and development, and readers are cautioned against assuming the continuity of a particular position or perspective. Careful attention to chronology and historicity can be invaluable, though texts also establish a life of their own. Merton continues: ‘When a thought is done with, let go of it. When something has been written, publish it, and go on to something else. [...] All that matters is that the old be recovered on a new plane and be, itself, a new reality’.⁵⁰

The implication is that our engagement with Merton’s recovery of the old can in turn lead to readers’ own reception of the old as a new reality. Whether ‘the old’ refers here to the ancient wisdom in whose literature Merton became immersed, or to something he himself once said, this description of a restless activity of inscription both liberating and

⁴⁶ *Reader*, p. vii.

⁴⁷ *Reader*, p. ix then p. x.

⁴⁸ *Reader*, p. x.

⁴⁹ Cf. the end of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, discussed in Chapter Four.

⁵⁰ *Reader*, p. x.

provisional is a noteworthy comment on twenty years' worth of writing. Merton would return time and again, spiraling like a proverbial hawk, in order to re-express the persistent, central concerns he glimpsed or felt. Sometimes this spiraling return is captured in the revisions of a particular text, such as the several versions of *(New) Seeds of Contemplation*.⁵¹ Notwithstanding the persistence of some form or other of progressive, developmental thinking in Merton, there is no need to assume that his later thoughts or recollections are necessarily more precise or developed than earlier ones; only that Merton moved from one perspective or form to another. He did repeatedly clarify or modify certain previous writings; but there are also dynamics at play which are motivated by factors other than a desire for ever-tighter formulations or force of argumentation. If anything, the journals in particular show that Merton in some ways loosened his grip on a controlling interpretative framework as he matured, whilst the body of work as a whole leaves impressions of a life growing 'in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy'.⁵² Contradiction and paradox are characteristic of the writing described from time to time by the author as 'existentialist' or as seeking to communicate a philosophy which consists 'in grace, mercy, and the realization of the "new life" that is in us who believe, by the gift of the Holy Spirit'.⁵³ His work coheres around a unifying reality:

Without the grace of God there could be no unity [...]. We can overlay the contradiction with statements and explanations, we can produce an illusory coherence, we can impose on life our intellectual systems and we can enforce upon our minds a certain strained and artificial peace. But this is not peace.⁵⁴

⁵¹ 'A red shouldered hawk wheels slowly over Newton's farm as if making his own special silence in the air – as if tracing out a circle of silence in the sky. How many graces, here in St. Anne's, that I did not know about, in those years when I was here all the time, when I had what I most wanted and never really knew it' (*Search*, p. 181, journal entry for 19 March 1958).

⁵² *Reader*, pp. x-xi.

⁵³ *Reader*, p.xi.

⁵⁴ *Reader*, p. xi.

The unity of a life assumes the grace of God, which alone makes bearable the persistence of contradiction and incoherence. More than this, a desire for coherence, manifest in the imposition of intellectual or otherwise 'arbitrary systems' leads ultimately to 'further conflict, resentment, hatred, war. We live on the brink of disaster because we do not know how to let life alone. We do not respect the living and fruitful contradictions and paradoxes of which true life is full'.⁵⁵ This is as clear a summary as any of Merton's understanding of the socio-political significance of his communicative monasticism, and he had made the point more discursively with *My Argument with the Gestapo*. As reflections on the dangers of distorting forms of intellectual coherence are linked with consideration of the destructive consequences of imposed public systems, so the clear distinctions break down between writings we might want to categorize as, say, 'social justice' or 'contemplative'. The habit of differentiating itself becomes problematic where it leads to naïve notions of Merton 'returning to the world' at some point or other. When Merton did direct a student to trace changes in his 'response to social problems', he did not indicate what that might mean.⁵⁶ There clearly are periods when Merton's output was more intensively focused on what are broadly recognized as public issues or social concerns; but his communicative writing, his silence and his secession challenge pre-established categories and shift the parameters when interpreted as aspects of a continuous, sustained engagement with the roots of the issues in question.

In a letter of 30 October 1965 to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton listed his books with category suggestions, indicating that he did not want the list published, suggesting that

⁵⁵ *Reader*, p. xi.

⁵⁶ Letter to Adria Marconi, 3 May 1968, in *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Collins Flame, 1990), pp. 368-69 (p. 369).

publishers 'should customarily leave out the really bad ones, *Exile Ends in Glory, What are These Wounds?* etc.'.⁵⁷ The categories Merton used are: verse; biography; autobiography; religion; history; theology; journal; poems / essays; essays; anthology; prose poems / essays; essays / notes; translations; translations of verse; and edited works (specifically for *Breakthrough to Peace* and *Gandhi on Non-Violence*).⁵⁸ Only *The Seven Storey Mountain* is described as autobiographical. Books given multiple descriptors are *The Behaviour of Titans* ('poems, essays'); *Raids on the Unspeakable* ('prose poems, essays') and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* ('essays, notes') – three books closely associated with one another. It is in this letter that Merton finally approves the title of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

The textual breadth and complexity of Merton is magnified when we take account of the array of sources he discusses or mentions, or from which he copied portions into one or other of his journals or working notebooks. In relation to these sources, Merton not only acts as a gateway or go-between (or, occasionally, as scholarly authority), but introduces readers to material he was continually absorbing, interpreting, echoing or translating into religious performance.

From ancient to modern, sacred to secular, East to West, there seems scarcely a philosopher, critic, artist or poet of any consequence who has not found his way into one of the great monk's innumerable vehicles of self-expression, be it essay, tract, journal, notebook, diary, novel, poem, or even audio and video tape.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ *Witness to Freedom*, p. 148.

⁵⁸ Jim Forest writes that '*Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination*, did make it into print, but when it went to press, Merton could not be identified by New Directions as the book's editor. Nonetheless, his introduction was published under his name and the book also contained one of his essays, "Peace: A Religious Responsibility," a text similar to the first chapter of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*' (*Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. and intro. by Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), p. xxiii).

⁵⁹ Dennis McCort, *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen, and Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 38. Robert Inchausti, in his *Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), describes Merton as 'a kind of performance artist to his secular literary peers - testing the integrity of his vision through a life of daily devotion and asceticism' (p. 6).

Merton is rarely cited as a scholarly authority on any of the several prominent sources which most deeply shaped him, but he models a way of imbibing or inhabiting literature in the process of continually refreshing attention to God. What readers in turn do with Merton's own reading or performing is a more complex matter, because his ways of reading were bound up with a monastic context and discipline that most of us do not share. What he does, nevertheless, is to entice readers into a multi-dimensional world in which writers and their subjects appear to communicate across space and time, whilst he skilfully evokes a real-time story dealing with fundamental human themes which resonate with readers' own living and thinking.

Categorizing, periodizing or otherwise organizing the literature can assist the task of identifying ideational developments, theological sources, ways of interpreting, characteristic methods and so forth. However, when the different facets of (or perspectives on) Merton are too strictly distinguished and separated, then what may be lost or overlooked is the way in which he draws readers into potentially creative work, including our dealing with the tensions which arise when contrasting perspectives are held in suspension. Readers are continually reminded, by Merton's autobiographical disposition, of the primary interpretative framework, which is the continuity of a historical life-in-context.

1.3.1 Categorizing the Author

If Merton's writings range across several established categories, the author himself resists being bounded by descriptors other than monk, writer and priest, or Catholic.⁶⁰ He has been

⁶⁰ On the latter, Merton writes in *Conjectures of Guilty Bystander*: 'One must be detached from systems and collective plans, without rancor toward them. To be truly Catholic is not merely to be correct according to an abstractly universal standard of truth, but also and above all to be able to enter into the problems and joys of all' (p. 182).

described as a social critic, artist, prophet, paradigm, everyman, spiritual master, 'symbol of a century' and so forth.⁶¹ Some call him a theologian, whilst others are reluctant to do so. The summary descriptions can help to locate Merton for the convenience of readers, schools or guilds; but the descriptions, like the pre-selecting of 'essential' writings, may unduly limit reading strategies and expectations.

In an academic assessment of Merton's legacy some ten years after his death, Lawrence Cunningham, referring to the thousand-plus-page collection of Merton poems, wrote that it 'does no disrespect to Merton's memory to say that he was not quite a poet of the first rank'.⁶² Cunningham made a similar evaluation of Merton's contribution to other fields, saying for example that he 'was not a theologian in the conventional sense of that word', meaning that 'there were no books from his pen providing us with systematic reflections on the datum of the faith'.⁶³ If Merton's poetry was 'not quite first rate' and his literary criticism was 'eclectic, occasional and of varying quality',⁶⁴ Merton fared no better in Cunningham's assessment as a social critic, 'though his social reflections could evoke powerful responses'.⁶⁵ Even 'as a monastic commentator Merton could not claim the scholarly stature of a Father Jean Leclercq'.⁶⁶ Within the bounds of each category, Merton is judged to be less than outstanding. Cunningham was not, however, simply pointing out Merton's limitations, but the limited value of attempting to frame Merton according to established criteria of literary form or academic category. To do so is to risk losing

⁶¹ These descriptions are from works cited in what follows.

⁶² Lawrence Cunningham, 'The Life of Merton as Paradigm: The View from Academe', in Patrick Hart, ed., *The Message of Thomas Merton* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), pp. 154-165 (p. 155).

⁶³ Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Thomas Merton: The Pursuit of Marginality' in *The Christian Century*, 6 December 1978, pp. 1181-1183 (p. 1181).

⁶⁴ Cunningham, 'Marginality', p. 1181.

⁶⁵ Cunningham, 'Marginality', p. 1181.

⁶⁶ Cunningham, 'Marginality', p. 1181.

perspective on the distinctive way in which Merton negotiates, queries or blurs established conventions, strategies and boundaries of literary or theological guilds; or indeed of more generalized, public patterns of meaning-making.

Merton the scholar was, as a monk, largely uninterested in academic theological debate, and did not write with the objectivity and distance typical of academic style then or now. 'As a theologian I have always been a pure amateur', he wrote in a dark mood on 6 June 1961, 'and the professionals resent an amateur making so much noise'.⁶⁷ Shannon, addressing the question of Merton as theologian, interpreted his experientially-rich vocabulary as characteristic of a 'contemplative' rather than a 'dogmatic' theologian, though little seems to be gained by establishing this sub-category. What Shannon meant is that Merton's 'theology was not an expounding of the truths of revelation in order to offer an intellectual appreciation of them; rather, it was the theology of one who could talk about God because he had first walked with God'.⁶⁸ The latter part of Shannon's statement does seem to imply some expounding of truths of revelation, but what might be meant is that Merton's determination to articulate and communicate experience effectively, accurately and honestly was not overly constrained by approved technical vocabularies or procedures such as were current within professional theological discourse. Merton did insist that what he called 'experienced theology' cannot be dismissed by 'the theology of a theologian without experience' simply because its meaning is inadequately expressed; but a phrase like 'theologian without experience' raises other problems, not least of which is the implied

⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life from his Journals* ed. and intro. by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (Oxford: Lion, 1999), p. 221.

⁶⁸ William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, revised edn (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987), p. 225.

separation of something called ‘experience’ from its formulation in language.⁶⁹ Merton can be blunt, and statements such as these need to be read in relation to the more careful reflections which emerged beyond the transient and partial comments he could make on the way to the accurate and honest expression he was seeking. For instance, he wrote more expansively about experience when introducing his informal collection of sayings and stories of the Desert Fathers:

Our time [...] needs to recapture something of the experience reflected in these lines. The word to emphasize is *experience*. [...] It would be futile to skip through these pages and lightly take note that the Fathers said this and this. What good will it do us to know merely that such things were once *said*? The important thing is that they were lived. That they flow from an experience of the deeper levels of life.⁷⁰

Merton may have been recalling struggles surrounding the writing of *The Ascent to Truth* when he wrote of the Desert Fathers that there is ‘more light and satisfaction in these laconic sayings than in many a long ascetic treatise full of details about ascending from one “degree” to another in the spiritual life.’⁷¹ Merton never quite escaped the magnetic pull of systems of progress in the spiritual life; but reflections such as these, alongside the reams of unsystematic data he produced, remind us that in Merton the systems are subordinate to other modes of expression and communication.⁷² By weaving biographical and other contextual detail around theological formulations, Merton gives readers ample indication

⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 45.

⁷⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p.11. Merton names his source as ‘the *Verba Seniorum* in Migne’s *Latin Patrology* (Volume 73)’, a collection distinguished, in his opinion, ‘from the other Desert Fathers’ literature by their total lack of literary artifice, their complete and honest simplicity’ (*Wisdom*, p.12). James Conner (in *We Are Already One*, p. 204) writes that Merton ‘was one of very few in the monastery who had read the sources of monastic history, usually in the Latin texts of *Migne Patrologia*, since little had been translated at that time. He had also read many of the early Fathers of the Church and the Cistercian Fathers.’

⁷¹ *Wisdom*, p. 13.

⁷² Merton’s late essay on ‘Final Integration – Toward a “Monastic Therapy”’, in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971), pp. 205-17, is an example of the prevalence of some form of progressive modelling of spiritual development.

that what is being communicated is testimony to experience, rather than ‘theoretical in our modern sense of the word’.⁷³ Acknowledging that he was not living like the Desert Fathers he so admired, Merton nevertheless reminded readers that his monastic vocation implied a movement away from generally-accepted customs and standards which undergird certain prescriptive categories and concepts:

With us it is often rather a case of men leaving the society of the ‘world’ in order to fit themselves into another kind of society, that of the religious family which they enter. They exchange the values, concepts and rites of the one for those of the others. [...] The social ‘norms’ of a monastic family are also apt to be conventional, and to live by them does not involve a leap into the void – only a radical change of customs and standards.⁷⁴

His leaving behind a dominant form of social organization included his leaving behind some of the assumed values, habits and methods by which theology is framed within that dominant socio-cultural structuring. Criteria which have currency in one framework of meaning do not necessarily have currency in another. Merton studied and wrote as the scholar, teacher, priest and monk that he was, in styles and forms consistent with his ruthless determination ‘to break all spiritual chains, and cast off the domination of alien compulsions, to find our true selves, to discover and develop our inalienable spiritual liberty and use it to build, on earth, the Kingdom of God’.⁷⁵

So when Shannon contrasted Merton’s existential mode with whatever he meant by an intellectual appreciation of the truths of revelation, he was describing style rather than defining what makes Merton’s writing significant as theology. Cunningham, on the other hand, came close to dismissing Merton altogether as a theologian when he wrote that:

One could not call him a theologian save in the patristic sense of one who spoke experientially of God. He produced no sustained reflection on the classical *loci* of

⁷³ *Wisdom*, p. 13.

⁷⁴ *Wisdom*, pp. 9-10.

⁷⁵ *Wisdom*, p. 24.

theology. Even in the area of ascetical theology it has been left to such scholars and commentators as John Higgins, Marilyn King, Raymond Bailey, Elena Malits and Henri Nouwen to reconstruct systematically what is latent or scattered in his many books.⁷⁶

Like Shannon, Cunningham referred to Merton's speaking 'experientially' of God; he did not, however, explain how this is possible apart from reference to classical loci of theology. More to the point, Merton fulfilled long-term responsibilities as Master of Scholastics and Master of Novices, in which his sustained reflection on classical loci of theology included, for example, 'no fewer than twenty conferences [...] taken up with *De Diligendo Deo*,' almost half of which 'first provide a general overview of Bernard's understanding of love'.⁷⁷ This, like many other examples of Merton's teaching practice and preparation, does seem to constitute 'sustained reflection on the classical loci of theology'. It is nevertheless telling that Merton 'finishes up his discussion of the *De Diligendo* by praising Bernard as a great creative writer who appealed to the whole person, to the imagination and the motions as well as the mind' whilst noting that 'a different approach is needed today, depending less on rhetoric, which can tend to antagonize as much as to convince, than on person-to-person contact'.⁷⁸

Since Cunningham wrote his earlier evaluation, other theological readings of Merton have continued the work of systematically organising Merton's latent or 'scattered' theology, not to fit Merton into a pre-defined category so much as to suggest how Merton has contributed to an evolving understanding of the theological task. Robert Inchausti, introducing a compilation of Merton's writings about writing, describes his theological

⁷⁶ Cunningham, 'Paradigm', p. 155.

⁷⁷ Patrick O'Connell in Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology*, Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8, ed. by Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), p. civ.

⁷⁸ O'Connell, *The Cistercian Fathers*, p. cv.

method as ‘exploring the existential dimensions of Thomist theology’⁷⁹ during the 1950s in particular, with an essentially apocalyptic outlook which, during the 1960s, ‘made him a decidedly different kind of social critic than any of his contemporaries’.⁸⁰ Inchausti’s point can be extended to other descriptors: if they are used, they need qualifying or explaining.

For instance, reference to Merton as a wisdom theologian invites further explanation, not least in relation to his essentially eschatological outlook. Merton, as has been made clear by scholars such as Pramuk, was greatly influenced, even to some extent liberated, by sophianic traditions, from the late 1950s onwards. The issue is chiefly about what readers imagine a wisdom theologian to be. The appellation might, in a present-day setting, encourage the kind of piecemeal appropriation of Mertonian aphorisms which already blunts the prophetic edge of his monastic withdrawal. Bernard McGinn, in an article of 2006, traces a continuity from the atopic *sitz im leben* of classical ‘wisdom-lovers’ through to Merton the twentieth-century monk, and does so in a way which retains and illuminates commonalities between the philosophical and prophetic dimensions of monastic witness.⁸¹ Merton’s ‘insistence on the marginality of the monk’ was, he says, ‘rooted deep in the inner and outer anachôresis of the first monastic ascetics’ who abandoned ‘the ordinary claims of society’ in order to take on ‘the identity of the ancient philosophers, or lovers of wisdom,

⁷⁹ Robert Inchausti, ed., *Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing* (London: New Seeds, 2007), p. viii. The next quotation is from the same source.

⁸⁰ *Echoing*, p. ix.

⁸¹ Bernard McGinn, ‘Withdrawal and Return: Reflections on Monastic Retreat from the World’, in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2006 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 149-172. Emphasizing Merton’s alignment with prophetic traditions, Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland writes in the Foreword to *Survival or Prophecy?: The Correspondence of Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton*, ed. and intro. by Patrick Hart (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), that ‘both Merton and Leclercq, cognizant that the Christian monastic tradition had first emerged as a form of prophetic witness against the ever more worldly Church, brought it to bear on the Church of their own day. They knew that the early monks had felt a need to witness to the Church first of all, especially against its tendency to compromise with the demands of the Empire and against its desire to seek power and prestige; and they sought to make such a witness with their own lives’ pp. ix-xv (p. xiv).

and even that of the prophets, those open to God's call to witness to truth and wisdom by deed and by word'.⁸² In the process, Wisdom encountered Merton as a disruptive inbreaking quite unlike the way in which Wisdom functions, say, in Walter Brueggemann's simplified representation of a Solomonic monarchical hegemony confronted by a fragile yet persistent Mosaic counter-narrative.⁸³ In this latter model, it is the Mosaic tradition, as Brueggemann presents it, which best represents Merton's parrhesiastic challenge not only to centres of power untroubled by more domesticated forms of wisdom but also, latterly, towards aspects of life in a monastic community that he sometimes feared was at risk of losing sight of a prophetic charism, and becoming less receptive of a disruptive, illuminating, reorienting Sophia. I make the point to illustrate how attempts to categorize the author-monk as one kind of theologian or another can be unhelpful unless descriptive terms are firmly grounded.

Around the time that Cunningham was writing his evaluation of Merton, Johann Baptist Metz was advocating restoration of 'the subject into the dogmatic consciousness of theology'.⁸⁴ Merton had died nine years before Metz published this particular work (in German in 1977) and for twenty years had pursued a quest to inhabit and perform the implications of inherited doctrinal formulations. In a late essay he describes in stark terms the prophetic task not of the theologian, but of theology itself:

In an age when man is crushed under unreasonable and unjust social structures and menaced with the threat of destruction in a ruthless power struggle which ignores all his true interests, it is evident that the most radical changes are called for in the most

⁸² McGinn, 'Withdrawal', p. 167.

⁸³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (London: SCM, 1978), chapters 1 & 2. In this particular book, Brueggemann does not deal as he does elsewhere with the complexities and critique internal to biblical Wisdom traditions.

⁸⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. by David Smith (London: Burns and Oates, 1980), p. 220.

urgent way. The only theological outlook adequate for our time is one which is frankly and unashamedly open to the need for revolutionary change in man's secular world. A detached, academic, purely speculative consideration of essences and attributes, a contemplation of formalities and an exquisite examination of purely spiritual causalities will no longer serve as theology in this century.⁸⁵

Merton is not known as a theological architect or an outstanding interpreter of classical texts; neither is he widely hailed as a poet or a theological teacher. 'Though analysis and speculation are by no means foreign to him', wrote fellow Trappist Leiva-Merikakis, Merton 'never takes his departure from an abstract theme or principle, but always from his own lived experience'.⁸⁶ For this reason, according to Leiva-Merikakis, the best writing 'is to be found in his journals and his letters', though even the analysis and speculation may be considered autobiographical 'since all of Merton's books were generated out of the context of daily monastic life and cannot be properly understood [...] apart from this concrete culture-medium'.⁸⁷

1.4 Telling Merton Stories: Autography, Biography, Autobiography

To readers, Merton is persona and story. There is a rich deposit of material from which numerous versions of the story might be configured, though the actual telling can become formulaic. Merton died suddenly on 10 December 1968 on the outskirts of Bangkok, Thailand, leaving an extensive literary and audio legacy, along with a portfolio of photography and other visual art. Twenty years earlier, in October 1948, he had entered the limelight through his story of beginnings, from birth in January 1915, through to becoming a

⁸⁵ 'Theology' in Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 105-107 (p. 107).

⁸⁶ Leiva-Merikakis, Simeon, 'The Older Brother Who Leapt' in Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 131-133 (p. 132). The following quotation is from the same page.

⁸⁷ Leiva-Merikakis, p. 132.

Trappist monk in December 1941, and the death of the only remaining member of his immediate family, his brother John Paul, reported missing in action in 1943.

Merton's name became quickly and widely known amongst readers who came across any of the six hundred thousand copies of *The Seven Storey Mountain* sold in its first year of publication. The autobiographical emphasis, which engaged readers so effectively, already permeated the poetry published during Merton's early years in the monastery. With the assistance of astute editors and an effective distribution network, Merton appeared to an unexpectedly wide readership of Cold War American Catholics and others intrigued by seemingly intimate access to the life of an enclosed monk. The book was presented as a narrative of withdrawal from the world; yet with that narrative, Merton entered the world of his readers and became a kind of public presence. He was present not just as ideas or art, but as persona and particularity. Positive reception of *Mountain* signalled a breadth of interest to which Merton responded in subsequent publications, which developed an autobiographical strain independently of *Mountain's* mythological structure. The story was compelling, as Merton brought into the public realm an implicit critique of aspects of a society which had recently emerged from a global war.

Almost seven years before the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton had made several attempts at writing novels, also autobiographical in one way or another. The one complete manuscript amongst them was prepared for publication by its author shortly before his final journey in 1968. The macaronic format of *My Argument with the Gestapo* either obscures its autobiographical intention or challenges what we understand

autobiographical work to be.⁸⁸ These books and the relation between them are discussed further in Chapter Four. The point I wish to make here is simply that Merton entered the public imagination as a story, a narrative he himself constructed by relating his 'own myth' to 'the whole myth of Europe and the West'.⁸⁹ He was, as T. R. Wright put it,

discovering not only a 'metaphor of the self', a focal point on which to build a sense of the subject's identity, but also a 'mythic statement' of the world, the creation of a 'symbolic universe' which enables the individual 'to understand and interpret, to articulate and organise, to synthesise and universalise his human experience.'⁹⁰

From the Kafkaesque imaginary journal which is *My Argument with the Gestapo* to the realist narrative of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, through the carefully-selected diary entries of *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Secular Journal* or the late *A Vow of Conversation* to the 'half-conscious pattern of associations'⁹¹ behind *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and onto the epic dream-world of *The Geography of Lograire*, Merton was continually evolving a 'symbolic universe' through autobiographical art.⁹² The publication of informal personal journals, selections of personal letters and other transient communications representing his life-world, together brought into the public domain a seemingly candid and more 'immediate' aspect of the author and his world, extending the range of possible modes of interaction between readers and imagined author.

⁸⁸ There is a sense in which, as Linda Anderson writes, citing Candace Lang, that 'if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it' (Anderson, *Autobiography*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 1).

⁸⁹ Merton, 'Author's Preface' to *My Argument With the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp. 9-10 of unnumbered pages (p. 10).

⁹⁰ T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p.92 quoting James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. vii and Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1944), p. 221.

⁹¹ Merton's journal entry for 20 September 1965 in *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 5, 1963-1965*, ed. and intro. by Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 297.

⁹² Other works cited include *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), *A Vow of Conversation*, ed. with an intro by Naomi Burton Stone (Basingstoke, Hants: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1988), *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

Personal mythologizing became an enduring means of engagement with a broader socio-political crisis, though the shift to a more realistic, prosaic style signalled a move towards an interpersonal communication dependent to some degree on trust in the connection between Merton's self-construction and historical actuality. Tina Beattie makes the point in an essay on Etty Hillesum:

I have suggested that Hillesum's diaries and letters are to some extent an act of self-creation, but I ask myself how I would feel if these writings were proved to be a fraud, if I discovered that Etty Hillesum was nothing more than a work of fiction. Would not the wisdom remain the same? Would the vision of God and humanity not be just as inspiring, just as poetic? I have to say that for me, they would not. It matters to me that this woman lived what she wrote, that between the unmediated reality of her everyday world and the carefully crafted language of her diaries and letters, a remembered human presence breathes between the lines and speaks in the gaps.⁹³

That Hillesum 'lived what she wrote' mattered to Beattie; that Merton lived what he wrote matters to this researcher. The force of the writing is, at least in part, derived from the author's persistent determination to convey something discovered as true to human experience, about being human in relation to others and to one's world. The writing process is part of the discovering, and Merton's level of satisfaction with his work depended not only on whether he had created something artful, but also on whether the writing adequately communicated what he felt to be real.

Communicating what is real does not require realist art. Wright (who described auto(bio)graphy as discovery of personal myth, metaphors of self and mythic statements of the world) adopted Roland Barthes' perspective on autobiography as always in some sense fictive, in which the subject, 'the character created in the world of the narrative, needs to be recognized as a literary fiction, an "autograph," a written version or interpretation of the

⁹³ Tina Beattie, 'Etty Hillesum: A Thinking Heart in a Darkened World' in Ursula King, ed., *Spirituality and Society in the New Millennium* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), pp. 247-258 (p.255).

self constructed by memory gathering together or “re-collecting” the disparate elements of experience’.⁹⁴ In Merton’s case, an ‘original system of metaphors’ might be a more precise term than ‘a system of original metaphors’, in that the combination is the unique factor, rather than the metaphors themselves. This matters especially where the author is representing Christian traditions, the Catholic Church and the Trappist Order, mediating between his reception and adoption of those traditions and reader response to the same.

Merton has been called ‘massively unoriginal’, and we need him to be precisely that if he is representative of traditions and institutions in which readers already hold a stake. Creatively restricted by internalized or external censorship, whilst forging literature from an ocean of inherited theological and religious vocabulary, Merton ranged beyond the Dantean medieval classic, Augustinian conversion narrative and sometimes-dualistic Johannine spirituality as he integrated the vocabularies of the likes of Chuang Tzu, Herbert Marcuse, Reza Arasteh and others who latterly populated his world. Abiding influences such as Blake, Joyce and Huxley lingered in the shadows, once left at the monastery gates then latterly welcomed back into literary conversation. The metaphors and vocabularies were not unique, but their blending in the continuous re-telling of life and perception was.

The reader who shares something of the religious faith of the author also brings another expectation to the text. Beattie continues:

I cannot believe that Hillesum’s God is merely a textual strategy for what would otherwise be inexplicable. Hillesum’s dialogue with God is not, in my reading, a conversation with herself. It is truly a dialogue with another, with the Other, and in the end, it is only the Other that allows her to believe that there is still meaning and truth in the world.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Wright, *Theology and Literature*, p. 93.

⁹⁵ Beattie, p. 255.

A deep desire for existential encounter with the truth of God in Christ, and an unswerving commitment to a life fully aligned with the reality of a God for which classical, Catholic Christianity had given him a vocabulary and vocational structure, mean that the author's determined struggle to live faithfully in the face of social crisis allows readers to negotiate their own efforts at faithful living. Merton's actual grappling with inherited traditions, vocabulary and structures of the Church then becomes a counterpoint for readers struggling with the same. In this process, a simple understanding of truth as facticity is not the main concern. Like Hillesum (though not under the extreme threat and violence she endured), Merton dealt with tensions between 'the imperative to create meaning on the one hand, and the imperative to record the truth even if it threatens all possible meanings on the other'.⁹⁶ He did so under the liberating constraints of religious life and representative ministry, providing a text to assist readers in navigating their own actualities and meanings.⁹⁷

Regarding the truth of autobiographical writing, Anderson refers to Philippe Lejeune's conclusion, amidst debate about the boundaries between autobiography, biography and fiction, that one absolute condition of autobiography is 'identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*'.⁹⁸ There remains a difficulty in applying this condition, notes Anderson, 'since the "identity" Lejeune speaks of can never really be established except as a

⁹⁶ Beattie, p. 251.

⁹⁷ Lawrence Cunningham in his 'Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton' (in Pennington, *Toward an Integrated Humanity*, pp. 192-203) wrote in 1988 that Merton 'is one of the very few public persons of our time who exhibited a genuinely Catholic mind, which is to say, that he was one of those exemplary figures who show us what it means to be a Christian believer in profundis while, at the same time, being unflinchingly open, to everything that might enlarge, give texture to, and deepen the existential choice of being a Christian. I think that this openness is akin to what David Steindl-Rast calls 'exposure' as he looks at Merton's pilgrimage to the East' (p. 193, referring to David Steindl-Rast, 'Exposure: Key to Thomas Merton's Asian Journal?', in *Monastic Studies* 10 (1974), pp. 181-201).

⁹⁸ Anderson, p. 2, referring to Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 193.

matter of *intention* on the part of the author'.⁹⁹ A focus on intention is no obvious solution, however, if what is implied is that the author's honesty 'guarantees the "truth" of the writing'.¹⁰⁰ The argument is circular. The reader is left with a decision about trust, in this case the extent of our trust in the connection between the author's writing and living.

In light of his extensive research amongst friends and associates of Merton, official biographer Michael Mott wrote in 1984 of the dismay 'to almost all those who knew him, or at least to those who knew *their* Merton, to find that he is still best known as an autobiographer'.¹⁰¹ Mott himself was less dismayed about the influence of a bestselling autobiography: '*The Seven Storey Mountain* was only the apparent beginning of what has been called "a continuing autobiography," and if Thomas Merton was to be concerned with autobiography all his life, he was also an anti-autobiographer'.¹⁰² What is implied by Mott's use of this term is more than Merton's continual deconstruction of his own self-presentations, which itself works against any fixed or complete version of a life story. Mott is also pointing to the ways in which Merton moved beyond a propensity for styles of self-telling traditionally associated with an autobiographical genre, as on the one hand he returned to an intentional blending of recalled experience and creative fictionalization and, on the other, he became more fully focused on the kind of intersubjective communicating which tends towards communion.

⁹⁹ Anderson, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon, 1984), p. xxii.

¹⁰² Mott, p. xxii.

1.5 Concluding Remarks: Reading the Literature as Expression and Extension of Monastic Practice

In this opening survey of the Merton corpus, I have considered not only the range of primary published material to which readers now have access, but also some of the ways in which it is organized, made available and introduced. These factors have a bearing on the reception and continuing influence of Merton, on impressions that readers derive of such things as his ongoing preoccupations, developments in thinking, changes of emphasis or direction, and the overall trajectory of his vocation and intellectual life.

In an influential biography, William Shannon writes, for instance, that ‘Merton’s journeying had brought him into the cloister and taken him “out of the world” for good – at least so he thought in the mid-1940s, when he was writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*’.¹⁰³ In the same paragraph he goes on to say that Merton at the time of writing hardly realized that his ‘interior journey would bring him back once again into the world he thought he had forsaken’.¹⁰⁴ By this, Shannon meant that Merton ‘would return to the world while remaining a monk, but the world he returned to was a world transfigured by his contemplative vision’.¹⁰⁵ So Shannon is careful to say that Merton does not quite return to where he once departed, and that this return is part of an ‘interior’ (that is, imagined) journey;¹⁰⁶ but this way of describing changes in Merton’s outlook or in the content of his

¹⁰³ William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 178.

¹⁰⁴ *Silent Lamp*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁵ *Silent Lamp*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁶ I am using the idea of imagination without negative connotations. The same is the case when I write of a reader’s ‘imagine Merton’. See for instance Merton’s use of the term in his class on Rilke, transcribed at Appendix 4: ‘Imagination, [...] it’s an interior sense. [...] What normally people think of as imagination is simply fantasy, see. [...] But imagination is not fantasy. Imagination is creative. And when you get imagination in this particular sense it is creative and re-creative and it’s a function of the intellect, see. It is a deep thing. Now, so if actually you are really connecting with a work of art or poetry you are re-creating, see. [...] You’ve got to re-create, yourself, the experience of the poet, otherwise you don’t connect’.

writing takes no account of the fact that, from the perspective of readers, the widespread distribution of *The Seven Storey Mountain* meant that Merton in 1948 became a significant literary presence in the kind of world from which he departed. It is this perspective, the perspective of readers, with which I am primarily concerned. To readers, Merton was (as he in a different way continues to be) present as distant and as conjured from encounter with literature. This is a matter of, amongst other things, what is meant by the notion that we 'live along the wires and are ourselves in our communicative relations with other people'.¹⁰⁷

In what follows, then, I take account of some of what Merton tells us, directly or implicitly, about his reasons for publishing or otherwise distributing writing. I will consider writing and publishing as actions, and as public actions to the extent that the effects (or potential effects) of those actions are publicly available. It was as a monk that Merton wrote and published; though it took him some time to assimilate or satisfactorily formulate the idea of publishing as monastic practice. In a typical reading of Merton's early struggles, Malgorzata Poks writes:

Thomas Merton had hoped to leave the world behind never to return to it again; he wanted to shut the door on his decadent youth and start an entirely new life under the new monastic name of Frater Maria Lodovicus. In the austere radicalism of the early years the young postulant sought no compromise between the writer he had hoped to be and the monk he was becoming, convinced that one of them had to die.¹⁰⁸

The tensions are traced in early journal entries, but this is not a simple matter of whether or not to be a writer. Merton was untangling the mixed motives behind a desire to publish, and an adequate resolution involved reframing that desire. This is precisely what we find in *The Sign of Jonas*, where Merton writes:

¹⁰⁷ Don Cupitt, *Turns of Phrase: Radical Theology from A to Z* (London: SCM Press, 2011), p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ Malgorzata Poks, 'Thomas Merton's Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons' in *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001), pp. 184-222 (p.184).

If I am to be a saint, I have not only to be a monk [...] but I must also put down on paper what I have become [...]: to put myself down on paper, in such a situation, with the most complete simplicity and integrity – masking nothing, confusing no issue: this is very hard, because I am all mixed up in illusion and attachments. These, too, will have to be put down. But without exaggeration, repetition, useless emphasis. [...] To be frank without being boring. It is a kind of crucifixion. [...] losing myself entirely by becoming public property just as Jesus is public property in the Mass.¹⁰⁹

Related tensions (such as the way in which artistic impulses distracted from contemplation) would recur, but the notion of kenotic divestment resolved, to some extent, underlying concerns about pride or celebrity on the one hand, and public participation or ‘Christian service’ on the other.¹¹⁰ Writing and publishing activities became aspects of the singular communicative action which was Merton’s monastic praxis in the face of social crisis.¹¹¹ The literature and recordings we now have are expression or extension of that distinctive faith-based response to perception of social crisis which resonated profoundly and personally in Merton. He was writing his monastic living into a public realm, even when writing to particular people or in private journals that the author anticipated would be read more widely.¹¹² To describe the author-monk as having a ‘dual vocation’ may be a useful device, but distracts from the essential unity of that vocation.¹¹³ In an early overview of scholarship

¹⁰⁹ Journal entry for 1 September 1949, in Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 228-229.

¹¹⁰ In a journal entry for 11 December, 1939, Merton wrote: ‘The first duty of the Christian.... is towards the poor and the sick: writing books comes a little after that, and then only for the saving of souls or for the full glory of God’ (Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation, The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 1, 1939-1941*, ed. and intro. by Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 101).

¹¹¹ Whilst Merton acknowledged and made public his inconsistencies, he was determined that his monastic vocation be consistently coherent. See, for instance, ‘First and Last Thoughts: An Author’s Preface’ in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962).

¹¹² A year before joining the monastery, on 4 December 1940, Merton wrote in his journal: ‘Why would I write anything, if not to be read? This journal is written for publication. It is about time I realized that, and wrote it with some art. All that screaming last year, to convince myself a journal was worth writing, but not to be read’ (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 271).

¹¹³ In a serious study of ‘the fusion of writer and monk’ in Merton, Peter Kountz concludes that ‘Merton’s highest goal was the reconciliation of his vocation as a writer with his vocation as a Trappist monk [...] He became himself through the merging of writer and monk’ (Kountz, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk: A Cultural Study, 1915-1951* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1991), p. 175).

about Merton, Victor A. Kramer concluded that there had not been enough written about ‘the productive tension which existed because he was both monk and almost compulsive writer’.¹¹⁴ The ‘both... and’ may be unhelpful: these do not have to be seen as contesting vocations.¹¹⁵ As an enclosed Trappist, Merton was distant, yet communicative. The combination seemed anomalous, but the writer-monk’s ambivalence about publishing subsided after a relatively brief period of struggling to reconcile an urge to write with the silent anonymity characteristic of Trappist tradition. Merton was a monk-writer, just as he was a monk-teacher. His writing and publishing were not extrinsic to his monastic vocation. What was actually at stake for Merton was the form of the singular monastic witness, and the matter of comprehensibility, of how his writing might be either received or lost in the dominant cultural context.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Artist*, Cistercian Studies Series No. 102 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 154.

¹¹⁵ More typically, Merton wrote to Czeslaw Milosz on 12 September 1959: ‘I still do not share your scruples about writing, though lately I have been thinking of giving it up for a while, and seeking a more austere and solitary kind of existence (I go through that cycle frequently, as you have seen in *The Sign of Jonas*, but this time it is more serious)’ (*The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), p. 63.

¹¹⁶ Merton’s *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1975) closes with ‘I am filled with anguish, at parting with the work I have so dangerously wrought! My book, precious as an only child, goes off on a terrible journey, in the hands of a maniac who believes he understands world affairs, political rights and wrongs, and what is going to happen in the war! [...] I think of Blake, filling paper with words, so that the words flew about the room for the angels to read, and after that, what if the paper was lost or destroyed? That is the only reason for wanting to write, Blake’s reason’ (p. 259).

CHAPTER 2: ENCOUNTERING AND RESPONDING TO MERTON

This matters the way light realizes the natural,
the constructed

angles on a building steadied

against the deforested ascent, descent

as if

the monastery placed by light represents

interim and in conversation with

as if

the candle lit in the presence of a deity

as if

when we abolish the symbols we lose

our situation we lose orientation.

You, you let yourself

be seduced¹

¹ 'Camera Obscura' in Lytton Smith, *While You Were Approaching The Spectacle But Before You Were Transformed By It* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2013).

2.1 The Merton of Merton Studies and of Popular Imagination

The first chapter was an overview of the published work which constitutes the Merton corpus, in anticipation of this second chapter in which I consider the reception of Merton, including how reception is influenced by ways in which the literature and other material are presented and circulated. In some ways like the first, this chapter is a survey and presentation of available evidence, with particular reference to two strands: on the one hand, Merton's awkward presence in the academy and, on the other, the characteristically interpersonal ways in which readers engage with (or dismiss) Merton.

When Rowan Williams wrote that the Merton who is 'the subject of Merton Studies' is not only dead but 'in no small danger of becoming dull', he captured a mood about the disproportionate preoccupation in some quarters with the man and his work, and the oddity of a discipline which revolves around a single person.² In 2014, Michael Higgins, then President of the International Thomas Merton Society, referred to Merton as 'a genre of his own'.³ The fact is not unproblematic, and may be indicative not only of the volume of writing on Merton, but also of an uneasy fit with established literary or theological categories. The writer-monk continues to attract widespread attention, whilst the phenomenon called 'Merton Studies' continues to flourish. I am wary of turning another spotlight towards where the over-exposed writer-monk left his imprint, but justify this present work on the grounds that the phenomenon of Merton's continuing effect, the way

² Rowan Williams, "'A person that nobody knows": A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton,' in Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), p. 17.

³ Michael W. Higgins, 'Merton, a genre on his own', *Catholic Register Special*, 20 September, 2014, <<http://www.catholicregister.org/arts/item/18836-merton-a-genre-on-his-own>> [accessed 21 September 2015]. In this review of Linus Mundy's *Simply Merton: Wisdom from his Journals* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014) Higgins writes that: 'the tsunami of publications chronicling his life and assessing his work reflects a stark range of competence, insight, and stylistic finesse.'

in which he continues to engage readers, has been given little sustained attention. This may matter beyond the world of Merton, inasmuch as his way of mediating and reanimating contemplative, prophetic theological traditions seems to have wider implications.

In 1948, Merton was thrust into the limelight of Cold War America as the author and protagonist of an effectively-promoted autobiography, which begins in one world war and ends in another. Twenty years later, his corpse was flown to the USA from the borders of a different war, shortly after his first and last televised lecture.⁴ He was killed by electricity on the day of that lecture, 10 December 1968. Five years further on, Patrick Hart wrote of the ‘number of eulogies’ published and the ‘more serious studies’ undertaken ‘in an effort to evaluate his contribution to our age’.⁵ At the time, Hart, who had been Merton’s personal secretary, was aware of ‘at least twenty-five doctoral candidates’⁶ who had chosen to research an aspect of Merton. Academic studies of the monk were underway as early as 1950, ‘soon after the publication of his earliest books’,⁷ and scholarly activity is undiminished. In the foreword to an expanded edition of the monastic tribute cited, Hart wrote in January 1983 that ‘we are just beginning to appreciate the enormous legacy of this

⁴ A few minutes of Merton’s final lecture is available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywE6bhApcSk>> [accessed 15 April 2017]. Dutch and Italian television teams were present. Robert Hudson writes that the Dutch delegation at the Bangkok conference had ‘a television crew in tow, convinced that a permanent record of the conference will be “good for the church.” A doubtful claim. Several weeks earlier [Merton] had promised Father Flavian that he would scrupulously avoid all publicity on this trip’ (Hudson, *The Monk’s Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan and the Perilous Summer of 1966* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 191.

⁵ Patrick Hart, ‘Preface to the First Edition’ in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, enlarged edn (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), pp. 11-14 (p. 11). The next quote is from the same page. The eulogies began early: on 11 December 1968 a *New York Times* front page piece was headed: ‘Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who spoke from the world of silence to questing millions who sought God, died yesterday in Bangkok, Thailand. He was 53 years old.’ See <<https://www.nytimes.com/1968/12/11/archives/thomas-merton-is-dead-at-53-monk-wrote-of-search-for-god-thomas.html>> [Accessed 10 October 2018].

⁶ Hart, *Thomas Merton/Monk*, p. 11.

⁷ Paul M. Pearson, ‘Preface’ in Burton, *Silence*, p. xi.

dedicated monk who lived a quarter of a century in our midst'.⁸ Another thirty years on, in 2014, approaching the centenary of Merton's birth, Robert Inchausti referred to Merton's works as having 'spawned hundreds, if not thousands, of critical commentaries, study groups, retreat centers, scholarly associations, and political action committees'.⁹ Secondary literature continues to appear regularly. There were, for example, more than a hundred books about Merton published in the fifteen years prior to the 2015 centenary of his birth.

2.1.1 Beyond Studies of Merton

In the first chapter I referred to several opinions about whether or not Merton is rightly categorized as a theologian, or indeed as any kind of specialist scholar. The debate about whether, where and how Merton belongs amidst academic discourse is lively and unresolved. Michael Downey, on the basis of his survey of the state of Merton scholarship in 1993, named what he saw as some of the outstanding tasks in relation to Merton studies; above all, 'to connect the discourse within the circle of Merton studies with the discourse in other fields' and 'to make room for a greater variety of voices in our ongoing conversations, even and especially those voices which might seem to interrupt and unsettle commonly held perceptions about Merton the man and the monk'.¹⁰ Downey concluded that 'Merton aficionados need an *aggiornamento*'.¹¹ He considered much Merton conversation to be 'claustrophobic' (an odd use of the word) and championed those studies which dared to 'veer away from the hagiographic' at the cost of being shunned.¹² As an example, Downey

⁸ Hart, *Thomas Merton/Monk*, p. x.

⁹ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 5.

¹⁰ Downey, Michael, 'Critical Turn Ahead!: 1992 in Merton Scholarship and Publication', in *The Merton Annual* 6 (1993) pp. 194-202 (p. 200).

¹¹ Downey, p. 200.

¹² Downey, p. 200.

called for more critical studies like that of David Cooper, who received a ‘cool reception’ for his ‘brave and refreshing critical interpretation of Merton, based on Merton’s own writings, rather than on the lore’.¹³ A quarter of a century ago Downey set out the task for a ‘new generation of Merton scholars’ with ‘different perspectives and a different task’:

Their work will not primarily be that of making the literary legacy of Thomas Merton available to an ever widening circle of readers. It is rather more a task of bringing a heightened critical hermeneutic to bear on the life and legacy of one who no doubt will stand up well under the most rigorous constructive critique [...] What is being suggested here is [...] that if the conversation around Merton is to be brought to a new plateau, a far greater measure of constructive critique is called for.¹⁴

The *Merton Annual* first appeared in 1988 as a ‘carefully edited and refereed organ for scholarship related to Thomas Merton’s accomplishments as monk and artist’.¹⁵

Contributing scholars were encouraged ‘to examine all aspects of his life and work [...] from biography to textual bibliography, from theology to sociology, from close reading to studies of culture’.¹⁶ Twelve years after Downey’s appeal, Victor Kramer, a founding editor of the *Annual*, suggested in his introduction to the pivotal Volume 17 (2005), that the wide range of cultural and critical commentary once anticipated has not been quite as hoped because ‘Merton readers and commentators remain within a fairly narrow spectrum’.¹⁷ The *Annual* continues to flourish as a principal vehicle for substantial Merton-related scholarship, whilst

¹³ Downey, p. 201.

¹⁴ Downey, p. 201. In Chapter 5 I consider further David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

¹⁵ ‘Introduction’ by the editors to *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988), ed. by Robert E. Daggy and others (New York: AMS Press, 1988), pp. ix-x (p. ix).

¹⁶ Robert E. Daggy and others, ‘Introduction’, p. x.

¹⁷ Victor A. Kramer, ‘Introduction: A Simplicity of Wonder: Merton’s Honor for the Particular Extending Outward’ in *The Merton Annual* 17, (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2004), pp. 7-13 (p. 12). This was the first edition to be published by Fons Vitae, and including a 55-page index to the first sixteen volumes of the *Merton Journal*.

other publications such as *The Merton Journal* and *The Merton Seasonal* blend scholarly contributions with a variety of poetic and popular responses to Merton.

2.1.2 Merton's Openness to Scholarship, and Indifference Towards the Academy

Scholarly interest in Merton was significantly boosted by the opening of the Merton Room at Bellarmine College, Kentucky in 1963.¹⁸ Whilst Merton did not write for the academy, he responded to students and researchers as the gracious and generous teacher that he was. His correspondence with students gives us some indication of what he considered suitable or interesting subjects for their attention. Seven months before he died, for example, Merton replied to Adria Marconi regarding her planned thesis on the monk's work, mentioning the 'new directions' represented by his current interests in 'Oriental religion' and 'the problems of renewal in the Church and in monastic life', as well as his 'more literary works in the fields of poetry and criticism'.¹⁹ Merton suggested that 'an obvious subject might be the development and change of my ideas from *The Seven Storey Mountain* to the present'.²⁰ He welcomed the student's interest and intention, commenting that little has been published on him by critics, and that where it had, 'most attention seems to have been focused on my response to social problems'.²¹ Merton suggested a study of his ideas; he did not suggest (though implied by referring to his later literary essays) attention to his actual practices of writing and publishing. Evidently he had been thinking about these matters, however, if only because they feature so prominently in the manuscript Merton sent for

¹⁸ In the preface to *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, enlarged edn (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), pp. 11-14, the editor Patrick Hart refers to 'the inauguration of the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College (Louisville, Kentucky) on November 10, 1963' (p. 11).

¹⁹ Letter to Adria Marconi, 3 May 1968, in Robert E. Daggy, ed., *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (London: Collins Flame, 1990), pp. 368-69 (p. 369).

²⁰ Merton to Adria Marconi, p. 369.

²¹ Merton to Adria Marconi, p. 369.

publication a few weeks after he wrote to Marconi.²² *My Argument with the Gestapo* was not available to researchers such as Marconi and, though it has now been available for almost fifty years, has still received little critical attention despite the light it sheds on the formation and meaning of Merton's monastic-writing vocation in the face of social crisis.

In view of some caution in the previous chapter about differentiating too readily between Merton's writing on social issues and on more classically religious themes, I note that, in his letter to Marconi, Merton contrasts interest in his response to 'social problems' with the popularity of his early books, implying that the earlier works are not dealing with social problems.²³ By contrast with the direct style of later work, this is clearly the case. I will go on to show in a later chapter how his early works do, however, signal the beginnings of his sustained and multi-dimensional engagement with social issues. This is a theme for a later chapter.

2.1.3 The Author's Instructions Regarding his Legacy

Merton spelled out instructions about his literary estate with a former classmate from their days at Columbia University, his friend John H. Slate. In letters to Slate, Merton discussed arrangements for the custody of his manuscripts (which he gave to Bellarmine College, Louisville), and his desire 'to keep the way open for publication of unpublished material and for the study and use of mss. by scholars, free from any unjust limitation or exploitation by others'.²⁴ Merton was specifically concerned about 'protecting material from misuse by

²² Letter from Merton to Naomi Burton Stone, 27 June 1968, in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 153.

²³ Letter to Adria Marconi, 3 May 1968, in *Road to Joy*, p. 369.

²⁴ Merton to John H. Slate, March 19, 1967, in *Road to Joy*, pp. 298-99 (p. 299). John Slate died on 19 September 1967, at almost the same age that Merton would die less than fifteen months later. Merton's letter of 22 September 1967 to his widow, Mary Ellen Slate is in *Road to Joy*, p. 303.

well-meaning idiots',²⁵ and gave detailed instructions regarding drafts of books, letters, notebooks and journals or diaries, taped journal material, juvenilia, and confidential material entrusted to James Laughlin. He laid out plans for an official biography:

Journals and Personal Notes, or any notes marked 'private' or 'not for publication,' are to be kept unpublished for at least twenty-five years after my death. These same journals and personal notes are not to be made available to scholars or others until they have been used by the writer of an official biography or overall study of my work, approved by the literary executors. This biographer may have access to the Journal etc. material. He may quote any material from these Journals etc. in his biography or in other studies.²⁶

The request for 'an official biography or overall study' suggests that Merton wanted private or informal writing to be read within a reliable and sympathetic framework of interpretation. Once the raw material became available, however, there could be no guarantee that it would actually be read in light of any official biography or overall study. Readers encounter Merton in any number of ways, not unlike how they might meet a living person, with whom first impressions or the opinions of friends and trusted others can influence reception. Our encounter can begin anywhere in the midst of an immense body of work - and of our own particular lives and networks.

The biographer's task involves making reasoned and sometimes delicate decisions about emphases and choice of interpretative models. The task is all the more complex with an author known as an autobiographer. Michael Mott was appointed Merton's official biographer in 1978, and produced what is still regarded as the standard biography of Merton. He was not the first appointed, as he explained in the introduction to his work: 'Following Merton's death in 1968, John Howard Griffin was appointed this biographer the

²⁵ Merton to John H. Slate, 24 March 1967, in *Road to Joy*, pp. 299-302 (p. 300).

²⁶ Merton to John H. Slate, 24 March 1967, in *Road to Joy*, pp. 299-302 (p. 301).

next year. By 1977 Mr. Griffin was too ill to continue'.²⁷ Griffin, who lived in Merton's hermitage whilst working on the biography, trying 'to approximate his schedule in my own research, going through his journals and other materials',²⁸ was propelled into a life of active campaigning against racism on the back of his publication of *Black Like Me*. Griffin was grateful for the invitation to research Merton, and in a comment on a life he was finding intolerable highlights one of the indirect, perhaps undervalued effects of Merton's separated life; an effect which may ripple, unrecognized, through posthumous readings of Merton. Griffin wrote that it was 'only with the awareness that there were people like Merton who didn't have to be out in those alleys which gave me the strength to do it. [...] I knew he was back there doing what I wished I could be doing'.²⁹

Following his tribute to Griffin, Mott, like his predecessor, also described something of the impact of Merton, specifically on those who had met him. He recalls how, amongst his

²⁷ Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon, 1984), p. xv. Monica Furlong's *Merton: A Biography* was published by Harper and Row in 1980, prior to Mott's official version, and met with some criticism, not least for its focus on crises in Merton's life, and what was perceived to be an unsympathetic account of Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox. Furlong's opening pages discuss evaluations of Merton, and support the need for a theological consideration of the *reception* of Merton over and above a misguided quest for 'the real Merton.' Years earlier, Edward Rice had published *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (New York: Doubleday, 1972) with a title lifted from an unpublished Merton manuscript. In 1982 Anthony T. Padovano produced *The Human Journey, Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday). Other notable biographies of Merton include M. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991); William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp* (1992), already cited; John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and films such as *Merton: A Film Biography* produced by Paul Wilkes (First Run Features, 1984) and Morgan Atkinson's *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton* (Duckworks, 2014).

²⁸ John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983), p. xiv. Griffin's *Black Like Me* was published by Signet (New York, 1962). Griffin writes of Merton that 'we had long worked together in the area of social justice and had become close friends' (*Follow the Ecstasy*, p. xi). A fuller and more detailed account of Griffin's engagement with and feelings towards Merton is the journal of his research for the official biography, published as *The Hermitage Journals, 1969-1972* (New York: Doubleday, 1983). Merton's hermitage schedule was described in his letter of 2 January 1966 to Abdul Azi, and in an essay dated October 1966 for a French monastic magazine, *La Lettre de Ligugé*, 121 (Jan/Feb 1967), pp. 30-36. An English version of 'Solitary Life in the Shadow of a Cistercian Monastery' is in *The Merton Seasonal* 37.4 (2012), pp. 3-8.

²⁹ *Ecstasy*, p. xii.

interviewees, ‘almost everyone who knew him’ spoke of a ‘sense that when Merton talked to you he made you feel – at least for the time – that you were his most intimate confidant’.³⁰ Merton seemed to have left impressions of a unique friendship with each of these many people; which (Mott noted at the time) could generate difficulties such as ‘many people thinking that they alone knew what Merton thought or planned for his own future’.³¹ Mott’s comment is well placed in the preface to an official biography, and Merton’s repeated and specific instruction about an official biographer may suggest that he was aware of the influential and partial impressions he was leaving with interlocutors.

2.1.4 Taking Seriously a Popular Merton

Following a review of several significant contributions to Merton scholarship, Robert Inchausti comments that ‘if Merton has influenced scholars and activists of very different interests and backgrounds, his celebrity has also inspired far less rigorous studies’ and ‘an increasing number of self-published works by various fans and fanatics, leading to a whole subgenre of Mertonian kitsch’.³² Inchausti is not concerned for Merton’s reputation, ‘provided serious readers and students of his work follow his contemplative lead and do not confuse such opinions and misrepresentations with his actual thinking’.³³ Disturbing as some

³⁰ Mott, Michael, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1984), p. xxvi. Mott was referring to people who actually knew Merton ‘in the flesh.’ Inchausti made a different but related point in his *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998) when he described attendees at the ITMS General Meeting in 1993: ‘The meeting had its share of academics interested in Merton scholarship, but there were also a number of Zen Buddhists from Japan, political dissenters from China, Beat poets from San Francisco and New York, Maryknoll nuns from Asia and Latin America, not to mention an eclectic collection of priests, housewives, school teachers, and lay religious from around the world. There was even a dance therapist from Seattle and a millionaire businessman on a metaphysical journey. All of these people saw Merton as the living, breathing embodiment of their own religious aspirations. His life and work, indeed his very voice and person, gave expression to their own sense of themselves as spiritual beings trapped within a twentieth-century secular Diaspora’ (pp. 3-4).

³¹ Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. xxvi.

³² Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2014), p. 143.

³³ Inchausti, *Thinking Through*, p. 143.

publications may be, popular readings are nevertheless indicators of ways in which Merton communicates and resonates with some readers. Often challenged by scholarly readings, they in turn also occasionally challenge scholarship.

Appropriations of Merton become problematic, however, when they mask or inoculate against a more serious and potentially transformative engagement with the implicit or direct challenge of Merton. Michael Higgins, in the article in which he referred to Merton as a genre unto himself, highlighted the problem of an industry marked by a 'stark range of competence, insight, and stylistic finesse'.³⁴ In his review of a 'wandering conversation' woven around selections from Merton's journals, he was less concerned with the perennial issue of 'one author's appropriation of another author's wisdom' than with the trivialization of the whole enterprise by authors who take little account of the 'historical context or the layers of multiple significance' in Merton texts. According to Higgins, the problem arises from the fact that whilst 'Merton is emphatically approachable, intelligible and credible', it is sometimes not so apparent in the secondary literature or talk about Merton that 'he is also demanding, serious and deep' and that these 'latter qualities should never be sacrificed in an effort to render Merton's spirituality an easy commodity, quick to access'. The widespread availability of 'private' or 'raw' material has amplified a tendency to focus on intimate, interpersonal readings, and may have contributed to a trivializing of Merton. The problem with weaker readings, however, is not just the commodification (Merton is repeatedly resistant to the notion that a contemplative way can be simply packaged, and learned as a programme or method), nor indeed the relational aspect; but an over-

³⁴ Michael W. Higgins, 'Merton, a genre on his own', in *Catholic Register Special*, 20 September 2014 <<http://www.catholicregister.org/arts/item/18836-merton-a-genre-on-his-own>> [accessed 21/09/15]. The following quotations in this paragraph are from the same source.

familiarity which does not take proper account of alterity, of Merton's thoroughgoing monasticism and the socio-political circumstances which gave it meaning.³⁵ When the journals are read alongside the letters, essays, poetry, teaching notes and recordings of classroom interaction by which Merton communicated time and again the particularity of his context and the subjectivity of his perspective, then the 'historical context or the layers of multiple significance' become apparent.

2.2 Testimony to the Appeal and Influence of Merton

Responses to Merton are coloured by readers' prior relationship with and attitude towards what he represents. Merton was extraordinarily 'capable of entering the larger world of cultural discourse' and did so 'while rooted in a tradition that gave a peculiar weight and a ring of authenticity to his words'³⁶ – for readers who appreciate and trust that tradition. Merton may represent to some readers a particular zeitgeist, but he did so from within a disciplined (and censored) allegiance to a tradition which adds gravitas and authority to his words where the tradition is already honoured. Relationship to traditions may be fluid, and Merton has (or had) a peculiar capacity to 'reanimate the sacred tradition'.³⁷ It is unclear as to whether Inchausti, when describing this capacity, was referring to Merton's past or his

³⁵ In a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* prepared for publication around the same as *My Argument*, with the ending of which it resonates, Merton wrote: 'People are constantly trying to use you to help them create the particular illusion by which they live. This is particularly true of the collective illusions which sometimes are accepted as ideologies. You must renounce and sacrifice the approval that is only a bribe enlisting your support of a collective illusion. You must not allow yourself to be represented as someone in whom a few of the favorite daydreams of the public have come true. You must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream' (Sheldon Press, 1977, p. 94). He continues, in a manner which may illuminate our reading of the 'epiphany' episode discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis: 'But be careful that you do not do this in the service of some other dream that is only a little less general and therefore seems to you to be more real because it is more exclusive!' (p. 94).

³⁶ Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'Introduction' to *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 15-55 (p. 31).

³⁷ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton* (Albany, NY: State University of New York), p. 1.

continuing influence. There is similar ambiguity in Cunningham's 1978 description of Merton's 'profound grasp of the Western tradition' and his 'ability to convey that tradition to an audience of contemporary people'.³⁸ There is a difference between the historical influence of a person on his own contemporaries, and the continuing influence of a dead author, even though the two are clearly related.

The likelihood that readers encounter Merton at all could be explained in terms of an effective and well-resourced publishing industry. Amongst those who do encounter him, there is continuing and repeated testimony to an experience of being captivated by compelling writing or a compelling story. Merton had his own views about the appeal. For instance, in the late publication, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, he wrote:

It seems to me that one of the reasons why my writing appeals to many people is precisely that I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers. In fact, I often wonder quite openly about these 'answers,' and about the habit of always having them ready. The best I can do is to look for some of the questions.³⁹

Robert Daggy described the attraction of Merton especially to younger readers in more straightforward terms of resonance with 'his unhappy childhood, his perceived lack of family [...] and his hope for a future world that would be better than the one in which he had grown up and in which he lived'.⁴⁰ That unhappy childhood was defined by the loss of his mother and father, and a seemingly rootless existence that he described when recalling life before Gethsemani. Merton becomes all the more intriguing as he reveals to the reader how vocation emerges from biography.

³⁸ Cunningham, 'Pursuit of Marginality' in *The Christian Century*, 6 December 1978, pp. 1181-83 (p. 1183).

³⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 48.

⁴⁰ Daggy, 'Road to Joy', p. 58.

Since the publication of personal journals and letters, readers have even greater scope for tracing this dynamic. Responses to the informal material have, however, been varied.

Michael Casey, who joined the Cistercians in the 1960s, considered the publication of private journals a pivotal event in Merton publishing, but not necessarily an endearing one:

In them the reader was confronted with Merton's chronic vocational difficulties and his unrealistic schemes for an ideal monastery, his unending struggles with authority, the pathos of his mid-life crisis and the restlessness of a mind constantly engaged with new avenues of reflection. All this gave context to his writings. Far less edifying was the underlying anger which seemed coiled and ready to spring out at any of the everyday idiocies encountered in community life.⁴¹

Casey thought Merton's portrayal of Cistercian life 'too glamorous' by contrast with the 'far more ordinary, obscure and laborious'⁴² reality into which he and others were being inducted. Admitting that he had 'gained some voyeuristic pleasure from *The Sign of Jonas*',⁴³ Casey notes the contrast between Merton's romanticized descriptions and his own everyday experiences. He recalls that those at Gethsemani who seemed most smitten by Merton's books did not stay.

James Conner was also a monk with Merton, and chose to highlight Merton's humility as a spiritual director.⁴⁴ Jo Raab refers similarly to the 'attractive humility'⁴⁵ represented by Merton's endearing honesty about his constant struggles. For Raab, it is this authenticity

⁴¹ Michael Casey, 'A Personal Trajectory' in *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope*, ed. by Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 265-267 (p. 266).

⁴² Casey, 'Personal', p. 265.

⁴³ Casey, 'Personal', p. 265.

⁴⁴ Conner, James, 'Thomas Merton as Spiritual Director' in *Already One*, pp. 204-207 (p. 206).

⁴⁵ Joseph Quinn Raab, 'Somebody's Gift: A Universal Language for the Contemplative Vision' in *Already One*, pp. 149-151 (p. 149). 'The preoccupation with authenticity is, I think, one of the most consistent unifying themes traceable in Merton's work, from the time of 'Elected Silence' onwards; indeed, even further back, in the 'Secular Journal', which contains material written between 1939 and 1941 [...] questions of personal and artistic integrity are obviously much to the fore in Merton's mind' (Rowan Williams, 'Bread in the Wilderness: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov' in *Theology and Prayer: Essays on Monastic Themes presented at the Orthodox-Cistercian Conference, Oxford, 1973*, ed. by A. M. Allchin (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius / Cistercian Publications, 1975), pp. 78-96 (p. 79).

which establishes Merton's authority. Others, such as Donald Grayston, highlighted Merton's spiritual director role, and the way in which they could enter imaginatively into that type of relationship: 'At some point in this journey Merton shifted from being simply the object of academic study and became my spiritual director in absentia'.⁴⁶ Others experienced an unexpected sense of invitation or awakening. For example, Victor Kramer, one-time editor of *The Merton Annual* and one of the editors of the private journals, recalled how he had been less than enamoured by the seeming abstraction of such books as *The Living Bread* and *Seeds of Contemplation*, then on reading *Raids on the Unspeakable* 'was awakened, changed into a real reader seeing then and there that we are surrounded by the Unspeakable'.⁴⁷ He described Merton as reading himself, the reader. Kramer 'began to see that the books were not a record of Merton's accomplishments. They were, above all, an invitation. His published insights were designed to draw others into mystery.'⁴⁸ On the basis of his experience, Kramer revised his understanding of what Merton was writing for. Donald P. St. John was less explicit about Merton's intention, but in similar fashion emphasized the effect of the literature, focusing not just on encounter with a particular book, but on an overall effect:

True to our experience of life, Merton, out of his own life and rich experiences, created a collage of complementary, sometimes paradoxical insights, scores of soaring reflections, tons of tantalizing metaphors, and countless chains of captivating images in both prose and poetry which have the power to transform us and the strength and wisdom to move us into a different place.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Donald Grayston, 'Non Finis Quaerendi: My Journey with Thomas Merton' in *Already One*, pp. 224-227 (p. 226).

⁴⁷ Victor Kramer, 'Learning From Merton: Dates, Research, Projects, and People (1958-2014)' in *Already One*, pp. 241-243 (p. 241).

⁴⁸ Kramer, 'Learning From', pp. 241-242.

⁴⁹ Donald P. St. John, 'Thomas Merton: Hope "Pops-Up" in My Life' in *Already One*, pp. 163-167 (p. 166).

The recollections cited are all included in a publication marking the 2015 centenary of Merton's birth. James Finley in the same collection also considers an overall effect of Merton, writing of how he 'encourages us to pay attention to what tends to happen as these fleeting flashes of spiritual awakening dissipate'.⁵⁰ Merton 'encourages us not to break faith with our awakened heart' but to adopt a 'stance or way of being in the world'⁵¹ on the basis of 'faith in the revelatory nature of our moments of spontaneous awakening that we cannot explain'.⁵² The process is potentially transformative 'when the way in which, or the level at which, we are experiencing whatever it is we are experiencing yields to a qualitatively richer, more interior experience that opens out upon previously unrecognized, more interior dimensions'.⁵³ How Merton encourages is not explained; but this, concludes Finley, is a 'foundational aspect of Merton's guidance in contemplative living'⁵⁴ and a source of his enduring appeal. Finley highlights Merton's capacity to awaken intuition of how 'the fullness of a presence that we are powerless to attain, attains us in our powerlessness to attain it',⁵⁵ but again, he does not say how Merton awakens such intuition.

In a review on J. S. Porter's book on the hermit Merton, Paul Pearson highlighted Porter's point about how the monk 'achieved presence to his reader so that the reader is left with the sense that they have met Merton in the flesh'.⁵⁶ Pearson concurs: 'you don't read Merton, you meet him'.⁵⁷ In the preface to a 2015 centenary volume, Pearson

⁵⁰ James Finley, 'Turning to Thomas Merton As Our Guide in Contemplative Living' in *Already One*, pp. 155-159 (p. 156).

⁵¹ Finley, 'Turning', p. 156.

⁵² Finley, 'Turning', p. 157.

⁵³ Finley, 'Turning', p. 157.

⁵⁴ Finley, 'Turning', p. 157.

⁵⁵ Finley, 'Turning', p. 157.

⁵⁶ Paul Pearson, Review of J. S. Porter, *Thomas Merton: Hermit at the Heart of Things* (Novalis: Ottawa, 2008), in *The Merton Journal* 15.2 (Advent 2008), pp. 50-52 (p. 51).

⁵⁷ Pearson, Review of Porter, p. 52.

comments on the ways in which many of the contributors bear witness to ‘the manner, indeed the gift, by which Merton speaks so intimately to his reader’.⁵⁸ By way of illustration, he refers to G. Porter Taylor’s experience of how *The Seven Storey Mountain* ‘read me as much as I read it’; and to Parker Palmer’s sense of Merton as ‘a kindred spirit who understood me better than anyone alive, better than I understood myself’.⁵⁹ Then he adds personal testimony: ‘As with countless readers before me, this was my own experience of discovering Merton, or, just as accurately, of being discovered by Merton’.⁶⁰ The implication is that knowing Merton is about more than being familiar with his ideas, his styles, his portfolio, or historical information; though it properly includes these. At the same time, knowing Merton cannot be reduced to a sense of personal affinity or a vicarious form of friendship. What we can say is that reading which is both empathetic and attentive to detail can heighten alertness to the subjectivity of both author and reader, and may give rise to transient impressions of the presence of an interlocutor or companion.

Another form of intimacy is referred to in Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo’s introduction to a compilation of selections from the published series of private journals (the appearance of which contributed a great deal to this characteristically intimate reading of Merton): ‘By hearing Merton’s literary voice, readers are seduced into listening to that still, quiet voice within themselves, one that longs to become incarnate in some outward gesture uniquely their own.’⁶¹ The intimacy opened up by the Merton text becomes fertile space for

⁵⁸ Paul M Pearson, ‘Foreword’, in *We Are Already One*, pp. 15-18 (p. 15).

⁵⁹ Pearson, ‘Foreword’ p. 15, citing Parker J. Palmer, ‘A Friendship, A Love, A Rescue’ in *Already One*, pp. 24-29 (p. 25). The next quotation is from the same page.

⁶⁰ Pearson, ‘Foreword’, p. 15.

⁶¹ Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, ‘A Path Through Merton’s Journals’ in *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, ed. by Hart and Montaldo (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999), pp. 9-17 (p. 15).

attention to a 'still, quiet voice' which is not that of the author or an imagined persona, but of the source to which the author is himself determinedly attentive.

2.2.1 Not Looking for What is Not There

Early in the course of my research I introduced Merton to students of theology, most of whom were only recently acclimatized to conventions and styles typical of current academic theological discourse. A few of the students made clear that, whilst Merton's story and world were mildly interesting, and some pieces of writing are attractive, it was not at all clear what he contributed to their theological studies. They knew that he taught and wrote about classic theological themes and sources, but his contribution to current conversation about the same did not seem especially noteworthy. Neither did he produce the kind of classic theological texts they were finding in, say, Augustine, Calvin or Julian. Page after page of Merton's journal reflections, observations and comment tested the patience of some students who, unlike some of their fellow students, found nothing intriguing, captivating or worthwhile.

The response of those particular students may have revealed the limitations of their teacher, but their puzzlement echoed responses of others who have sought something in Merton which is simply not there. In the Foreword of a re-working of Anthony Padovano's earlier book introducing Merton as a 'symbol of a century', Jonathan Montaldo describes his quest to figure out the appeal of Merton. He concludes that there is no particular element of the writing that 'merited world-class attention'.⁶² Others agree. Cunningham, whose similar evaluation was mentioned in the first chapter, recalled that Merton had not been

⁶² Jonathan Montaldo, 'Foreword: A Genius For Reconciling the Irreconcilable' in Anthony T. Padovano, *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2014), kindle location 12-57 (location 36).

one of the more prominent public Catholics even when his literary peak coincided with Catholic *aggiornamento*: ‘Curiously enough, in the halcyon days immediately after Vatican II, Merton was not – if memory serves well – one of the “media stars” of Catholic publishing’.⁶³

Attempts to identify the appeal or purpose of Merton, or to establish how to relate to his work, sometimes focus on what he was (and is) not. In a 2015 centennial assessment, Inchausti said that ‘despite his renown, or perhaps because of it, certain fundamental questions remain as to the significance of Merton’s legacy’.⁶⁴ Following several questions about the content and style of that legacy, Inchausti sees the problem as amplified because we are dealing with a creative, monastic writer who ‘was not, strictly speaking, a theologian’.⁶⁵ What is helpful in Inchausti’s overview is his conclusion that the distinctiveness of this Christian writer has more to do with the fact that he ‘lived and wrote in a monastery – that unique liminal space between ancient and modern existence’.⁶⁶ Cunningham in 1981 had made a similar point when recalling that whilst ‘the battlecry of relevance and engagement was sounding across the landscape of America, Merton was writing about, and living through, the ideals of detachment, silence, and the deep solitude characteristic of the eremitical life’.⁶⁷ He too concluded that, in the end, we understand Merton only ‘as he understood himself: as a monk’.⁶⁸

⁶³ Cunningham, ‘Merton as Paradigm’, pp. 155-56.

⁶⁴ Inchausti, *Thinking Through*, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁵ Inchausti, *Thinking Through*, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Inchausti, *Thinking Through*, p. 6.

⁶⁷ Cunningham, ‘Merton as Paradigm’, pp. 155-56. Donald Grayston, in *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984) refers to ‘paradigmatic’ theology in relation to Merton, alongside other suggested categories such as ‘monastic’ theology.

⁶⁸ Cunningham, ‘Paradigm’, p. 156.

In light of this conclusion Cunningham, somewhat surprisingly, still celebrated Merton as paradigm. It is precisely as monk that he is not paradigmatic, in that the vast majority of readers do not follow Merton's secession from mainstream society into an intentionally contrary liminal space. This point is key to my argument about continuing reception of Merton. His social location, economic situation, access or vulnerability to media, intensity of religious practice, range of responsibilities, disciplines, options for interaction and so on can be assumed to be markedly different from those of most readers. Of those who did follow Merton's path into monastic life, many did not stay. It is not clear, then, in what sense Merton's influence is paradigmatic. If readers relate to him as a monk, most of us do so whilst remaining enmeshed in the kind of social context he left. We relate to him, in other words, as one who is always in some way intentionally distant and separated. In *The Wisdom of the Desert*,⁶⁹ Merton aligns himself with the fourth century desert dwellers of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia, who 'believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster'.⁷⁰ Alert to criticism as he wrote into a time 'when Christianity is accused on all sides of preaching negativism and withdrawal – of having no effective way of meeting the problems of the age',⁷¹ he counters with a conviction that not only did these desert dwellers meet the problems of the age, but they were:

among the few who were ahead of their time, and opened the way for the development of a new man and a new society. They represent what modern social philosophers (Jaspers, Mumford) call the emergence of the 'axial man,' the forerunner of the modern personalist man'.⁷²

⁶⁹ *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (London: Sheldon Press, 1961).

⁷⁰ *Wisdom*, p. 3.

⁷¹ *Wisdom*, p. 4.

⁷² *Desert*, p. 4. Echoes of this 'forerunner' notion recur in Merton's notes prepared for the Calcutta and Bangkok meetings in 1968, which I discuss in Chapter 5 below.

Merton the personalist re-appropriated the ‘axial’ tradition against the ‘pragmatic individualism’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which (as he saw it in 1960) ‘prepared the way for the great regression to the herd mentality that is taking place right now’.⁷³ Thus he traced his own vocational ancestry through the line of pioneering desert dwellers; but not only these. The following year, an essay was published in which Merton heralded another pioneer, ‘who was no Desert Father’.⁷⁴ Clement of Alexandria was ‘the first to embrace with his whole heart the new and dangerous vocation of teaching Christianity to the intellectuals and society people of a great cosmopolitan city’.⁷⁵ We need only to pick up Merton’s ‘Message to Poets’ or his ‘Letter to an Innocent Bystander’,⁷⁶ or read his description of an ‘apostolate of friendship’,⁷⁷ to see how in Clement Merton saw something of his own public vocation and style.

As an instance of either desert dweller or cosmopolitan urban pioneer, it is unclear how Merton is, for readers, paradigmatic. In a looser sense, however, he may be considered so. John Moses’ 2014 biographical study of ‘a man who continues to enthrall, to perplex and to challenge’⁷⁸ describes sympathetically how Merton’s ‘warm, vital humanity continues to delight’⁷⁹ despite, or even because of, the fact that he appears to be ‘in so many ways a bundle of contradictions, and yet he represents a type of discipleship – open, engaged, compassionate, critical – in which the search for God was paramount’.⁸⁰ In this account,

⁷³ *Wisdom*, p. 4.

⁷⁴ *Clement of Alexandria, Selections from ‘The Protreptikos’: An Essay and Translation by Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 2.

⁷⁵ *Clement*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ These are both in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

⁷⁷ Letter of 10 November 1958 to Pope John XXIII, in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 481-83.

⁷⁸ John Moses, *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. xiii.

⁷⁹ Moses, p. xiii.

⁸⁰ Moses, p. xiii.

Merton's practice of searching for God is delinked from its specifically monastic form, so that it might be transferable to readers' own ways of searching for God. This delinking may, however, diminish the very form of Merton's faith praxis and therefore of the potential for the literature to extend the effect of his witness into the faith praxis and continuing interactions of readers. In similar fashion, Moses abstracts from its specifically monastic form another aspect of Merton's appeal: namely, the autobiographical mode of his writing. It is the autobiographical mode which Montaldo identified as central to the appeal of Merton, more specifically the blending of autobiography and theology. He goes further, noting that what appeals is not simply that Merton's autobiographical inscriptions are interesting, but that they resonate with how readers experience their world:

the appeal seemed to be in two things: first, in the fusion of biography and theology. Secondly, and perhaps more important, Merton resonated in a subliminal way for people when they read him; he captures the dynamics of the age in which they are living. He is dealing with the same tensions.⁸¹

This is a variation on the more domestic point made by Daggy about resonances with Merton's story. Here the emphasis is on the broader 'dynamics of the age'; but if Merton is 'dealing with the same tensions' he is doing so, vitally, as one who has made the critical response of moving from one form of social organization to another. His being a monk, separated from aspects of society in which I as a reader continue to participate and from which I continue to benefit, modifies my understanding and experience of those tensions. At the heart of Merton's enduring witness and curious appeal is the fact of his monastic secession and immersion, the seriousness and strangeness of which are effectively communicated through autobiographical aspects of the writing.

⁸¹ Montaldo, 'Foreword' in Padovano, *Spiritual Genius*, kindle ebook, location 36.

In this sense, Merton can be approached as the type of classic person described in David Clairmont's 2011 study. Meaning, it is through a sustained textualization of a 'particular form of life'⁸² that Merton passes on not only tentative formulations and responses to felt questions, but also 'the question that prompts their lived response', thus serving 'as the lived correlate to the literary classic'.⁸³ We encounter him as implicit question, challenge, and illustration of the repercussions of dogmas 'in the life of a soul in which they begin to find a concrete realization'.⁸⁴ In Clairmont's thesis, classic persons are not simply moral exemplars or models for 'prudential decision-making', but 'instantiations of moral struggle that highlight the particular interactions between ideas and practices'.⁸⁵ Merton does this, relentlessly, and with a peculiar capacity to establish quasi-interpersonal relationships which sustain readers' efforts to 'discern the place where the questions of the author meet the questions of our time'.⁸⁶

2.3 Personal Responses to a Disclosive Monk

There is a sense in which Merton is now more fully present to readers than ever he was during his lifetime. Not only is there considerably more material available, but the nature of much of the posthumously-published material is more candid, more personal, seeming to bring readers into closer contact with the life and character of an otherwise distant monk. Merton intended or expected that informal writings such as journals and letters would become available, so we rightly view them as aspects of his intentional communicating with

⁸² David Clairmont, *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. 19.

⁸³ Clairmont, p. 19.

⁸⁴ Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, p.18.

⁸⁵ Clairmont, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Clairmont, p. 19.

future readers. Matthew Kelty, contemporary with Merton at Gethsemani, commented on this in a rare review of a Merton collection:

But the puzzling thing to me is how it was possible for this man to sit down and share some thoughts with a friend, knowing the while that the carbon copy would be filed away (he kept orderly files, if sloppy in other ways), would some day, without much doubt, see itself in print. Just as when he made entries in his journals, many of them private and semi-private, he was able to write as if he did not know that every line would one day show up in a book, or at least be edited for a book.⁸⁷

The disclosive style attracts some readers whilst repelling others, such as Mary Jo Weaver, who criticized Merton as ‘neurotic, over-published, and extraordinarily self-centered’.⁸⁸ The reaction is not without justification, and highlights an ever-present hazard for readers dealing with an author who, according to Inchausti, ‘transformed the genre of spiritual autobiography from an exercise in doctrinal piety into an in-depth analysis of the interior life’.⁸⁹ As previously illustrated, Merton reveals personality, traits and behaviours which readers can find unattractive. The extent of his self-referencing can irritate. He is problematic for those who consider personal narrative irrelevant, or contrary to the vocation of a Trappist monk. January 1953 saw publication of ‘the first full-length appraisal of Merton’ in which the English Benedictine Aelred Graham ‘criticized Merton [...] for his projection of his personal experience into his writing’.⁹⁰ A matter of weeks later, in February

⁸⁷ Matthew Kelty, ‘The Hidden Ground of Love’ in *My Song is of Mercy: Writings of Matthew Kelty, Monk of Gethsemani*, ed. by Michael Downey (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994), pp. 93-95 (p. 94).

⁸⁸ Mary Jo Weaver, ‘Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader: Thomas Merton 25 Years Later’, in *Horizons* 30 (Fall 2003), pp. 285-296 (p. 291 & p. 285), cited in Fred W. Herron, ‘A Bricoleur in the Monastery: Merton’s Tactics in a Nothing Place’, in Victor A. Kramer and David Belcastro, eds., *The Merton Annual* 19 (2006), pp. 114-127 (p.114). Herron mistakenly calls the article “Conjectures of a Disenchanted Bystander.” Weaver’s perspective and interests are represented at <http://indiana.edu/~relstud/people/profiles/weaver_maryjo> [accessed 10 September 2015].

⁸⁹ Inchausti, *Thinking Through*, p. 6.

⁹⁰ Fred W. Herron, ‘A Bricoleur in the Monastery: Merton’s Tactics in a Nothing Place’, in *The Merton Annual* 19 (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2006), pp. 114-127 (p. 114). The appraisal in question is Aelred Graham, ‘Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse’, in *Atlantic* 191 (January 1953), pp. 70-74. Graham wrote on 5 February 1953 to the publisher Robert Giroux, thanking him for *The Sign of Jonas* which he was at the time ‘reading through with interest’ <<http://merton.org/Research/Correspondence/y1.aspx?id=797>> [accessed 25/10/17]. In response to the review, Merton wrote to Graham on 15 January 1953, thanking him for the

1953, *The Sign of Jonas* was published, the first of another personal genre, the journal.⁹¹

Following some controversy with censors and publishers, the carefully-edited compilation opened a window on to private thoughts and a traditionally hidden world.⁹² The book was well received by a public whose response to Merton's previous publication on Cistercian life, *The Waters of Siloe*, had been relatively subdued by comparison with the widespread acclamation for the previous year's autobiography.⁹³ The second entry in *Jonas* refers to a letter from Naomi Burton of Curtis Brown publishers, about the manuscript of *Mountain*. Merton also mentions two anthologies of poetry for New Directions press.⁹⁴ By the time of Graham's critical appraisal, Merton had published two more short collections of poetry, a book of contemplative pensées, two brief biographies and *The Ascent to Truth*, an uncharacteristically systematic treatment of the mystical theology of St John of the Cross.⁹⁵

article, noting that 'at bottom, your objection is basically due to a clash of temperaments more than anything else. For my own part I have always felt that the things I write do not at all represent what I would really like to say' (*School of Charity*, p. 49). The description of Graham's as the 'first full length appraisal' is from David Joseph Belcastro, 'Thomas Merton: American Monk, Artist and Social Critic,' *Theological Librarianship* 7.2 (July 2014), pp. 31-44 (p. 31). Belcastro was, at the time of writing, president of the International Thomas Merton Society and co-editor of *The Merton Annual*.

⁹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956). On the background to publication of a journal, Michael Mott wrote that 'Merton's persistence had already won a reconsideration about publishing these journals in his lifetime. The abbot had given him permission to try to win the Order over to the idea, no more. Merton took this for an endorsement from Dom James' (*Seven Mountains*, p. 268). There had been various complications during this period about publishing Merton's material, due in no small part to interpretations of Merton's apparently naïve promises or generosity. His tendency to be unsettled was also particularly intense during 1952, when he was actively pursuing a transfer to either the Camaldoli or the Carthusians, or seeking a new foundation. This is well documented in Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

⁹² Mott, *Seven Mountains*, pp. 269-275.

⁹³ Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1949).

⁹⁴ *Jonas* begins with an entry dated 10 December 1946, the fifth anniversary of Merton's arrival at the monastery. The second entry is dated 13 December. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was finally accepted for publication on 29 December 1946. The poetry collections to which he refers are *Thirty Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1944) and *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

⁹⁵ The subsequent poetry collections are *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947) and *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949), the latter being shortlisted for a Pulitzer prize in the year when the prize was awarded to Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize. The biographical works are *Exile Ends in Glory: The Life of a Trappistine, Mother M. Berchmans, O.C.S.O.* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1948) and *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywières* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1950), both of which Merton brushed under the carpet. The collection of pensées was *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949). In *The Ascent*

No Merton journal had yet been published. In other words, Graham was responding to only a foretaste of the swathes of personal detail subsequently made available through serial publication of five extensive compilations of personal correspondence, seven substantial volumes of private journals, hundreds of hours' worth of audio recordings and posthumously-published books.

A host of personal accounts, tributes and correspondence from people who knew Merton blur the edges of the primary literature in a corpus where theological discourse is not readily separable from autobiographical narrative and interpersonal communicating. The distinctive blend helped establish Merton as a pivotal figure of twentieth-century Western Christian praxis, and continues to sustain and extend interest. Where one reader encounters an overbearing literary personality, another recognizes a form of Benedictine humility in the very fact of candid outpouring.⁹⁶ Something of this is suggested in Williams' reflections on the impact of Merton:

What the published journals document at length is the way in which this chameleon-like dimension to his mind was always being abraded and refined by sharply self-critical honesty [...]. Like many great religious poets and autobiographers, he uses his writing, private and public, to exorcise rather than indulge fantasy. And [...] he discovers more and more deeply the serious unseriousness of trying to be honest before God – the 'unbearable lightness' of faith.⁹⁷

to Truth (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1951), Merton traces something of his struggle to clarify the relationship between scholastic theological tradition and his own distinctive contribution. Appealing to St John's Thomistic credentials, and to Pius XI's endorsement of his theological authority, Merton was at pains to make the case that 'Saint John is primarily a theologian and not only what is loosely referred to as a "spiritual writer"' (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991, p. 91).

⁹⁶ In the introduction to his translation of Jean-Baptiste Chautard, *The Spirit of Simplicity* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2017), Merton cites William of Saint Thierry: 'simplicity means genuine humility; that is, a virtue which seeks the approval of conscience rather than the applause of fame, and according to which the simple man is not afraid to be thought a fool by the world, in order that he may be wise unto God' (p. xviii).

⁹⁷ Rowan Williams, 'Author's Foreword' to *Silent Action*, pp. 9-10 (p. 9).

Williams writes of being ‘fascinated by the richness of the writing, attracted by the intensity of the spiritual energy’.⁹⁸ He continues with an interpersonal analogy: ‘Going back repeatedly to Merton has felt like picking up an interrupted conversation [...]. Once you have begun to engage with Merton, seeds are sown for long thoughts and prayers [...]; he is not someone who is read once and then filed away’.⁹⁹ He is, rather, ‘a writer who for so many has changed the landscape of Christian reflection once and for all’.¹⁰⁰ In the midst of a carefully-crafted study of the development of Merton’s theological method and the emergence of a sophianic Christology, Christopher Pramuk describes what Merton effects, and how he achieves that effect:

his writing bears us, body and soul, into the heart of the Christian Good News, such that one can begin not only to hear and see it, but believe it. Believe what? In a word, that one is loved, that one belongs in the world, that human life has meaning and purpose in the vast cosmos. [...] If nothing else, Merton’s poetic theology cultivates the willingness to believe, the desire to fall on one’s knees and beg to be loved in such a way.¹⁰¹

Pramuk testifies to a sense of being carried into an experience of the affirmation and kindling of a spiritual freedom already given. Merton’s writing ‘electrifies’ the ‘non-symbolic content of incarnation’ with poetic theology which convinces the intellect, cultivates a will to respond, and liberates the reader. Even if similar things may be said about other authors and their readers, the point is not lost: a distinctive characteristic of Merton’s contribution to the theological enterprise is not so much propositional as inspirational and relational,

⁹⁸ *Silent Action*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ *Silent Action*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁰ *Silent Action*, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, p. 126). A fuller version of the Heschel passage is quoted on pp. 64-65 of Pramuk, *Sophia*. In my MPhil (1994) I discussed Merton’s early reflections his ‘conversion of the intellect’ preceding a ‘conversion of the will’, and his demonstrating the place of emotion in a process of conversion. ‘Interior life is what happens when you come alive in contact with reality’, as he went on to say in a class on Rilke: ‘Interior life is the capacity to respond. If you respond, you’re alive’ (Appendix 4).

where the relationship between reader and the narrative heart of Merton's writing is fertile with potential for religious response.

2.3.1 The Reader Searches for a More Real Author

The author of a 2013 review of audio recordings of Merton's teaching, lamenting the gradual, inevitable passing of people who knew Merton personally and who were willing to share information about him, welcomed the recordings as opportunity 'to meet the human individual'.¹⁰² Alongside the memoirs of those who knew him, and the journals and letters written by him, the reviewer thought that 'CDs provide another aspect of this search for the flesh-and-blood Merton' because in the hearing 'we experience his witty (and not so witty) asides; we observe his teaching style, and get a picture of how he interacted with his brothers in the monastery community'.¹⁰³ More than a careful reader seeking accuracy, this reviewer was searching for 'the real Merton'.

Points to note include the fact that to aspire 'to meet the human individual' can seem a curiously acceptable thing to say in relation to Merton. Then, the reviewer delineates the ways in which this personal encounter may be simulated: firstly, via other people's interpersonal knowledge of Merton; then by reading letters and journals; then by hearing recordings of Merton's voice. Each of these points of access began to become generally available only fifteen or more years after Merton's death. The books for which he had become so well known are not mentioned at all. The reviewer went on to describe a dynamic only visible or imaginable because of the availability of the private journals;

¹⁰² Suzanne Zuercher, 'Listening to Merton the Man and the Mentor', Review of *Thomas Merton on the 12 Degrees of Humility*, intro. by Anthony Ciorra (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012) [8 CD set] in *The Merton Seasonal* Vol.38, No.1, Spring 2013, pp. 37-38 (p.38). The next quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

¹⁰³ Zuercher, 'Listening', p. 38.

namely, that we can read back into some of the things Merton published, or spoke about in class, issues pertinent to him personally, which might not have been evident in formal publications alone, or to participants in his classes. There is a 'level of communication beyond the sharing of information',¹⁰⁴ more accessible to present-day readers than it was to any but Merton's closest friends during his lifetime.

What is hinted at in this review is the way in which a sense of intimacy is picked up through more than Merton's detailed accounts of everyday events. Moods and thoughts, personality and inconsistencies, cares and foibles and other characteristics of the author are conveyed through the way in which the contents of informal literature and associated media are read back into the tapestry of more formal publications. A sense of intimacy, in other words, arises not simply from the fact of seemingly candid autobiography, but from the ways in which elements of the corpus play upon one another in the experience of a particular reader.

This review may not be typical, but the emphasis on wanting to know, or simply feeling a sense of affinity with 'the flesh-and-blood Merton' is not unusual. The posthumous availability of private journals, notebooks, letters and recordings, which were unknown to readers during his lifetime, has increased opportunity for getting to know the author in a relatively intimate way. The interpersonal mode of reader response to Merton is recognized and acknowledged by scholars, though rarely pursued as the significant hermeneutic dynamic it clearly is. Whilst careful study is necessary for informing, for avoiding inaccuracies, identifying sources and influences and circumstances, for contesting

¹⁰⁴ Zuercher, 'Listening' p.38.

interpretations and so on, it is at least feasible that an empathetic reader might intuit something missed by the most careful and well-informed scholars.

2.4 Concluding Remarks: The Merton of Merton Studies is Dead; Interpersonal Engagement Continues

Following on from the first chapter, I have continued to lay out what it is that we are dealing with in a study of the present-day reception of Merton. This chapter has been broadly about Merton's presence to readers, and ways in which readers approach, experience or imagine him. I considered the awkward (and, in the UK, barely discernible) presence of Merton in the theological academy, then took note of what seems to be a distinctive effect of Merton upon readers who discover something more akin to interpersonal engagement with a persona conjured from the literature. Along the way I noted some of Merton's concerns about, and plans for, his literary legacy - and some critical responses to the personal, seemingly disclosive nature of his writing and publishing.

In 'A Person That Nobody Knows', Williams cautions against the illusion that a reader can know Merton in the straightforward sense in which one might know an actual flesh-and-blood person. He recalls Merton's wearied submission recorded in a journal entry for 22 December 1949, and published in *The Sign of Jonas*. Merton was reaffirming his need to be alone, to belong to nobody but God: 'I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis – he's half-dead too.'¹⁰⁵ The subject of Merton Studies may be dead and at risk of becoming dull, but we are nevertheless 'determined that we *shall* know him, in all the meticulous detail possible. And so [...] we

¹⁰⁵ *Silent Action*, p. 17, citing *Jonas*, p. 247.

shall make it quite, quite certain that he will indeed be “a person that nobody knows.” As unknown and yet well-known’.¹⁰⁶ Williams explains this apparent paradox in relation to a core theme in Merton’s writing, that of the illusory self. He sees the absence of a known person as invitation to another way of knowing, as a threshold to a reality framed by the particularity of a single life through which aspects of that reality coincide in a unique way:

the ego of self-oriented desire and manifold qualities, seeking to dominate and organize the world, is absent. There is no-one there to know; but what *is* there to know is the form, the configuration of a wider reality expressed in one place, one story. It will not be the story of an interesting and original personality, but the story of one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world.¹⁰⁷

To write critically (as academic convention dictates) about a person rather than about their work, can seem inappropriate and awkward; but Merton resists a clear differentiation between his work and his inscribed persona. He is open to judgement, and necessarily so. There is, however, a difference between the now dead author and his literary shadow. The distinction may be less clear for those who knew him in the flesh, whose tributes and recollections have greatly influenced reception of Merton. The rest of us, however, relate instead to one another, to the stories we are told, and to an imagined persona emerging from the endlessly-shifting versions and projections of the ‘paper self’ which Merton left in his wake.

Whilst a preoccupation with the historical Merton is sometimes seen as problematic, his writing is imbued with details of a particular life lived and thought. In June 1995, James Conner began his presidential address for the International Thomas Merton Society Fourth General Meeting at Saint Bonaventure University by recalling that when his ‘predecessor as

¹⁰⁶ *Silent Action*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁷ *Silent Action*, pp. 17-18.

President, Bonnie B. Thurston, gave her address last time, she began with a disclaimer, saying that she had no interest in Thomas Merton the man'.¹⁰⁸ Thurston's statement is mystifying, considering the fundamentally autobiographical, existentialist nature of Merton's work. In similar fashion, Helen Burn in a review writes that 'we have to empty Merton out of his words if they are to do the work he intended'.¹⁰⁹ It is unclear what this means, but if Burn was suggesting that some kind of 'essence' might be distilled from the biographical packaging, this is misguided; not least because, as Burn herself recognizes, 'it is in part the light [that his words] shed on this complex and fascinating man that draws the reader in'.¹¹⁰

In the next chapter I will pursue the interpersonal theme introduced here, but specifically in relation to what Merton has to say about his relationship with readers and others. In so doing, I am turning towards the critical question of how his distinctive way of communicating fits within, and illuminates, his overarching vocation as communicative monk. The peculiarly relational form of communicating is a defining characteristic of his public praxis. The other characteristic, already highlighted, is his movement from one form of social organization to another - his becoming a monk, a hermit, a marginal person or stranger. That will be the focus of my fourth chapter.

¹⁰⁸ <http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/1995PresidentialAddress.pdf> (accessed 20/07/14).

¹⁰⁹ Helen Burn, review of *Precious Thoughts: Daily Readings from the Correspondence of Thomas Merton* selected and ed. by Fiona Gardner (Darton Longman and Todd, London 2011), in *The Merton Journal* 19.1 (2012), pp. 43-45 (p. 44).

¹¹⁰ Burn, pp. 44-45.

CHAPTER 3: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION AS COUNTER-CULTURAL PRAXIS

Let us then live in a communion which undermines the power and arrogance of the great of this world, which seeks to separate men in the power struggle.

Thomas Merton to José Coronel Urtecho, 15 March 1964.¹

A monastery is not a snail's shell, nor is religious faith a kind of spiritual fallout shelter into which one can plunge to escape the criminal realities of an apocalyptic age. Never has the total solidarity of all men, either in good or in evil, been so obvious and so unavoidable. I believe we live in a time in which one cannot help making decisions for or against man, for or against life, for or against justice, for or against truth. And according to my way of thinking, all these decisions rolled into one (for they are inseparable) amount to a decision for or against God.

Thomas Merton, 'In Acceptance of the Pax Medal', 1963.²

¹ Merton to José Coronel Urtecho, 15 March 1964, in *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), pp. 171-173 (p. 172).

² In *Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. and intro. by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall Publishing, 1971), pp. 257-58 (p. 257).

I have said that Merton's distinctive contribution to continuing theological discourse and the faith praxis of readers is illuminated when we pay particular attention to the nature of his continuing communication, and not just (for instance) to propositional content distilled from his writing. In the previous chapter I surveyed some of the evidence of ways in which readers relate to Merton. In this chapter I consider in more depth how those ways of relating, and the apparent intersubjectivity, are described and dealt with. Throughout, I take account of things Merton said which have a bearing on our interpreting his continuing communication as an extension of his overarching vocational intention.

Though the author is dead and his actual life even less accessible than it once was, he continues to be experienced as entrusting readers with personal ephemera and intimate matters in a way which gives rise to impressions of solidarity or friendship. Merton is experienced as doing more than just passing on ideas, telling us about his world or scripting our various moods and perceptions. Readers continue to be drawn into forms of intertextuality which mimic or mediate person-to-person interaction. Whilst the seemingly disclosive, personal nature of some of the material renders Merton vulnerable to, on the one hand, over-enthusiastic distortions or fantasy and, on the other, dismissal as a serious theological writer, it would be remiss to overlook these particular relational, communicative practices of a monk-writer for whom relationality and communication were such central concerns.³

³ For some writers the sense of intimacy extends so far as imagining being able to speak afresh Merton's thoughts. Les McKeown writes in a review of Joan C. McDonald, *Tom Merton: A Personal Biography* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2006) that the author 'has extrapolated the events of Merton's life at certain key times by the insertion of dialogue and self-analysis denoted by italicized passages. This dramatization is purely the result of her own imagination' (*Merton Journal* 14.2 (2007), pp.47-48 (p. 47)). A similar method is used with a little more caution in Suzanne Zuercher, OSB, *The Ground of Truth and Love: Reflections on Thomas Merton's Relationship With the Woman Known as 'M'* (Chicago: In Extensio, 2014).

Thinking in later years about his legacy, Merton questioned the nature of the intimacy readers might experience through his writings. In a journal entry for 14 July 1967, in irritable mood, Merton reflected more critically on the collecting of his work:

all the business of filing and cataloguing every little slip of paper I ever wrote on! What a comedy! But I like it and cooperate wholeheartedly because I imagine it is for real. That I will last. That I will be a person, studied and commented on [...] This is a problem, man.⁴

In the same journal entry, we find him railing against the Abbot and his vacillating about retirement. He goes so far as to describe Dom James as ‘cheating’; then, in a typical move Merton denounces his own ‘cheating’, before this diatribe about archiving and about a dedicated room at Bellarmine. In the journal for 2 October 1967, reflections on the Merton Room (‘to which I have a silver key, and where I never go, but where the public go – where strangers are and will be’)⁵ seem to be influenced by Gaston Bachelard, with whose work Merton the literary scholar was getting acquainted. He was especially impressed by *La Poétique de l’Espace*,⁶ on phenomenology of language and poetic experience, themes which surface in, for example, the recordings of Merton’s conferences on Rainer Maria Rilke which took place between mid-November 1965 and late March 1966.⁷ The ‘bloody cuckoo’s nest’

⁴ *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 6, 1966-1967*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 264. By contrast, Merton wrote for the opening of the Room in November 1963: ‘Whatever may be of interest to you in my work certainly belongs to you by right. I would not feel I was doing you justice in keeping it from you. If, on the other hand, there is much here that is trivial or useless, I trust your indulgence to overlook it and to pray for me’ (‘Concerning the collection in the Bellarmine College Library’, in *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* by Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Monsignor Horrigan (Santa Barbara, CA: Unicorn Press, 1971), pp. 13-15.

⁵ *Learning to Love*, p. 296 (Merton’s italics). Following quotations in this paragraph, with page numbers in parentheses, are from the journal entry for the same date.

⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’Espace*, 3rd edn (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1961).

⁷ In his *Going Beyond the Pairs: The Coincidence of Opposites in German Romanticism, Zen and Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), Dennis McCort describes ‘Merton’s intense relationship to Rainer Maria Rilke over a four-month span in the mid-1960s [...] to have been shaped by a stunning ambivalence, a consuming psychospiritual dialectic culminating finally in Merton’s liberating experience of the *coincidentia* shortly before his death’ (p. 38). Merton gave eleven classes on Rainer Maria Rilke from mid-November 1965 into March 1966.

represents to Merton his 'stupid lifelong homelessness, rootlessness'⁸ even at Gethsemani (though there is nowhere else he wants to go). In that moment he saw the Merton Room as 'a kind of escape from Gethsemani' and from the carelessness with which his papers – 'everything I have put my heart into'⁹ – had been treated. The room 'in which a paper-self builds its nest to be visited by strangers in a strange land of unreal intimacy' was causing anxiety, because it seemed to be 'futile – a non-survival', even more alien than Gethsemani.¹⁰ This was his 'last despairing childish effort at love for some unknown people in some unknown future',¹¹ an effort Merton described as 'Rilkean'. Again, Rilke surfaces. Then Merton goes further: 'All right if they do like what I have written – or don't – if they understand or don't – this is only a kind of non-communication in the end.'¹² His thoughts about communicating into the future, or about any imagined intimacy, could sometimes be gloomy and despondent.

Merton appeared dispirited about artificiality, or about his papers seeming to matter more than himself. He was repeatedly disappointed with the actualities of monastic living, and sometimes revealed a longing for straightforward flesh-and-blood intimacy, and associated stability. It was only a little earlier, in the summer of 1966, that Merton had allowed the prospect of an enduring, intimately sexual relationship to drift away. A little earlier again, on the eve of his fiftieth birthday in 1965, in anticipation of taking up residence at the hermitage, he had also been lamenting lost intimacy, regretting his cavalier disregard for the love he had at the time been unprepared to accept. During that birthday

⁸ *Learning to Love*, p. 296.

⁹ *Learning to Love*, p. 296.

¹⁰ *Learning to Love*, p. 296.

¹¹ *Learning to Love*, p. 297.

¹² *Learning to Love*, p. 297.

vigil he was also remembering how he had been diverted by illusion and a desire to match up to his own pre-defined self-image.¹³ These same strands are woven throughout his reflections on the Merton Room, along with thoughts about the phenomenology of poetry, and about things left unsaid:

maybe I have to say it by not saying. Word play won't do it. Or *will* do it = *Geography of Lograire*. Writing this is most fun for me now, because in it I think I have finally got away from self-consciousness and introversion. It may be my final liberation from all diaries. Maybe that is my one remaining task.¹⁴

These and preceding reflections temper whatever is said about a reader's sense of intimacy with Merton. Yet even his private questioning of desires and intentions are committed to writing and left for future readers, fuelling that very intimacy which extends to present-day readers the kind of kenotic, priestly vocation he had described when coming to terms with his monastic writing vocation almost twenty years previously.¹⁵

3.1 Taking Soundings from Merton's Interpersonal Readings

Merton was not averse to relating to authors in a quasi-interpersonal manner. He knew from experience that a writer's capacity to establish intimacy with imaginative readers was an enduring gift to those readers, whatever the cost to the author. In a study of what Merton's journals reveal about him as a reader, Chris Orvin identifies several examples of

¹³ *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 5, 1963-1965*, ed. and intro. by Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 198.

¹⁴ *Learning to Love*, p. 297.

¹⁵ On 8 February 1948 Merton wrote: 'Perhaps I am afraid of being absorbed in the public anonymity of the priest, of becoming one of those masks behind whom Christ hides and acts. I think of so many priests I know in their strange, sensitive isolation, innocent, hearty men, decent and unoriginal and generally unperplexed too; but all of them lost in a public privacy. They are Christ's property and everybody's property' (*Entering the Silence*, p. 165). On 1 September 1949 his reflections on writing developed the theme: 'To be as good a monk as I can, and to remain myself, and to write about it [...] One of the results of all this could well be a complete and holy transparency: living, praying and writing in the light of the Holy Spirit, losing myself entirely by becoming public property in the Mass. Perhaps this is an important aspect of my priesthood – my living of my Mass: to become as plain as a Host in the hands of everybody. [...] Yet, after all, this only teaches me that nothing vital about myself can ever be public property!' (*Entering*, pp. 365-66).

Merton encountering authors as ‘living people with whom he feels an “interior bond,” who bring him messages, or act as living personal acquaintances’.¹⁶ Merton, suggests Orvin, ‘had a proclivity to find living authors in his reading’, for example when ‘imaginatively envisioning’ St. Thomas, St. Bonaventure or Duns Scotus ‘as living people’.¹⁷ Sometimes the description is more intimate, for example with Emily Dickinson, who Merton describes as his ‘own flesh and blood’.¹⁸ Dickinson, who ‘would not be understood in her own time’,¹⁹ holding back from those who might not appreciate her entirely, nevertheless gave herself (as Merton describes) ‘completely to people of other ages and places who never saw her’.²⁰ In Orvin’s view, Merton did much the same; and it is reasonable to conclude that his admiring description of Dickinson is indication that he would welcome being interpreted and appreciated in similar fashion. There are other instances in which Merton’s descriptions of writers indicate how he himself would like to be received by a reading public. In his foreword to a book on St Bernard, Merton writes: ‘If we really take the trouble to know him, we will gain more than mere respect for his great gifts. We will come to admire and love him. Admiration and love mean little, without imitation.’²¹ Merton implies that his own life is an attempted imitation of Bernard’s, and also seems to be commending imitation by

¹⁶ Chris Orvin, ‘The Conflict Not Yet Fully Faced: Thomas Merton as Reader in His Journals’, in *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005), pp. 205-236 (p. 224). Orvin cites *The Journals of Thomas Merton* Vol. 3, p. 223 and Vol. 2, pp. 136 and 38.

¹⁷ Orvin, p. 224.

¹⁸ Orvin, p. 224, referring to *The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol.3, p. 364. According to Malgorzata Poks in her ‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’ (in *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 14 (2001), p. 197) Merton had exiled himself from the world ‘much like Emily Dickinson whom he unconsciously evokes in the poem “The Philosophers”’ (p. 197).

¹⁹ Orvin, p. 224.

²⁰ Orvin, p. 224.

²¹ Merton, ‘Foreword’ in Henri Daniel-Rops, *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Story of the Last of the Great Church Fathers*, trans. by E. Abbott (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1964), pp. 5-7 (p. 7). He continues: ‘Perhaps our own century needs nothing so much as the combined anger and gentleness of another Bernard.’

those who have grown to admire and love his own work through the effort of getting to know him.

On this matter of imitation, I commented in the previous chapter. As with the idea of Merton as paradigm, the notion of imitation is problematic; not least because we simply do not live the life of a Merton or a Bernard, or encounter Bernard and others in circumstances like Merton's. In most instances, our reading is not integral to an equivalent of his monastic secession, immersion, silence and discipline. So Merton's relationship with Dickinson – which is not so much imitation as companionship – seems the better model. As Merton's companion was, to all intents and purposes, an imagined presence, so is Merton for many of his readers. The fact that a Mertonian persona is so frequently reconstituted from literature and imagination, and experienced as though an actual presence, is an indication of the peculiar character of this body of work and the reading network which has arisen around it. In 'the life of Merton as paradigm', Cunningham in 1981 described how 'Merton's public *persona* was projected primarily through the publication of a series of autobiographical disclosures that began in 1948 with *Seven Storey Mountain* and ended in 1973 with the posthumous publication of *The Asian Journal*'.²² This persona was, according to Cunningham, 'fleshed out further by his many other volumes of writings that ranged over a broad area of human inquiry'.²³ Cunningham's summary was written before Merton's raw journals or collections of letters had become generally available, and before the publication of influential biographies - all of which flesh out a persona and, perhaps more significantly, reveal more about Merton's own continuous, subjective interactions with texts and the socio-religious circumstances in which he was reading. Merton narrated his responsive

²² Cunningham, 'Merton as Paradigm', p. 155.

²³ Cunningham, 'Merton as Paradigm', p. 155.

attention to traditions represented by the literature, liturgy, aesthetics and disciplines in which he became immersed, not unlike his description of Bernard of Clairvaux ‘plunged deep in the mystery of the Cross, which was the mystery of God’s will for his world and ours’ such that he ‘became a passionate embodiment of the truths in which he believed’.²⁴ Esther de Waal, in her own description of Merton’s treatment of St. Bernard and other early Cistercian texts, makes the simple yet important point that Merton writes ‘as a witness to a living tradition, with the result that his treatment is contemplative, the fruit of his own meditated reading’.²⁵ He is also more than witness: he becomes mediator and manifestation of a tradition which continues to live in the interactions between present-day readers and these texts. He assists in connecting readers with the greater cloud of witnesses. He writes as a priestly representative - bound by vows and disciplines, by *imprimatur* and monastery walls - of lively traditions and of the Church established around them. He presents readers with a gradual working out in practice of the implications of encounters with classic texts, doctrinal formulations, inherited practices and with the God to whom they directed him and go on directing us. He may be exceptional; but if he were too original he would not represent a recognizably authoritative expression of Christian faith practice. By making known the circumstances of his reading and thinking, Merton potentially sharpens an

²⁴ Merton in H. Daniel-Rops, *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Story of the Last of the Great Church Fathers*, trans. by E. Abbott (London: Hawthorn, 1964), p. 5.

²⁵ Esther de Waal, *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998) p. 16. In his preface to *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute*, New Enlarged Edition, ed. by Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), Patrick Hart writes (p. 11): ‘At the inauguration of the Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College (Louisville, Kentucky) on November 10, 1963, Father Merton summarized the unifying element in his writings in the following terms: “Whatever I may have written, I think it can all be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church, which is His Mystical Body. It is also a witness to the fact that there is, and must be, in the Church, a contemplative life which has no other function than to realize these mysterious things, and return to God all the thanks and praise that human hearts can give Him.’ (The Thomas Merton Studies Center, Unicorn Press, Santa Barbara, 1971, pp.14-15)”’.

awareness that we too express, however inarticulately, 'one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world',²⁶ always in relation to the unique perspective of each other person.

As Master of Novices and, previously, of Scholastics, Merton gathered, processed and imparted knowledge of faith traditions and sources, as even cursory attention to his extensive teaching notes and recordings makes plain. He is better known, however, for ways in which 'his meditation on sacred and secular texts became a meditation on his own personal history and the way in which the landscape of his interior life took shape'.²⁷ The subjective nature of his readings is not hidden, because those readings are presented in an overarching autobiographical idiom, such that the reader is not unaware that 'when reading Merton we enter a literary world composed of creative misreadings, complex and sometimes contradictory, but, as a consequence, more often than not rich and vibrant as a painting by Cézanne'.²⁸

Whether or not 'creative misreadings' is a fair description, Merton explicitly and repeatedly presents himself as a subjective, limited reader of texts, and as one who changes perspective or shifts opinion. Careful readers are continually alerted to the particularity, transience, incompleteness and dialogical nature not only of Merton's readings but of our own, including our reading of Merton. Following the lead of the literature itself, we are encouraged to be attentive to where and how our reading (of persons and contexts as well as of literature) relates to our own primary commitments, and how it may continually

²⁶ Rowan Williams, 'A person that nobody knows', p. 18.

²⁷ David Joseph Belcastro, 'An Obscure Theology Misread: 2003 Bibliographic Review' in *The Merton Annual* 17, ed. by Victor A. Kramer (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2004), pp. 256-285 (p. 261). The next quote is from the same review.

²⁸ Belcastro, 'Obscure', p. 261.

realign our sense of place in the web of relations which is the world. Merton thus differs from theological writings which are less transparent about their subjectivity and transience. To read him is more like relating to a present person in a manner which allows for the typical foibles, limitations and complexities of everyday relationality.

It may go without saying that responses to Merton, like our responses to actually present persons, are influenced by any number of factors - such as the circumstances under which literature is encountered, or views about the appropriateness of intentionally autobiographical material as a medium of theological writing, or prior opinions about monasticism and so forth. Sensibilities change, as do accepted theological writing styles - and an author's sudden death certainly heightens interest in his or her personal life. Merton's American and European identity, his maleness or his unmarried status, his intellectualism or his Catholicism or any number of other attributes influence reader response even before any of the author's attitudes, opinions or behaviours are taken into account. By laying so much before a reading public, Merton opened himself to judgement. We may be inclined to agree with Aelred Graham (whose view later changed) that Merton projects too much personality into his writing; or we may be grateful that Merton makes little effort to pretend that writing is any other than extension of personal (particular, perspectival, relational) experience. Self-centred he may often be, but our reactions to that impression may depend on whether we are willing to distinguish between, on the one hand, self-interest, self-promotion, self-obsession or solipsism and, on the other, a conviction 'that the restoration of God's image in us is the heart of what Christian theology, liturgy and contemplation all aim at'.²⁹ Readers can always become fixated upon the person or world of

²⁹ Rowan Williams, Foreword in Moses, *Discontent*, p. xi.

Merton, but there are others for whom 'being interested in Thomas Merton is *not* being interested in an original, a "shaping" mind, but being interested in God and human possibilities'.³⁰ Merton was continually dismantling illusions of objectivity, including tendencies by readers and researchers to objectify the author. The Merton with whom people imaginatively interact and speak of friendship is a composite emerging from more kaleidoscopic, fluid, cumulative ways of reading than is easily represented by, say, chronological reconstruction. Even Merton's autobiographical works have mythologizing characteristics and structure, and late works which function autobiographically are in several instances released altogether from calendrical anchor points, such that his recollections, inscriptions and struggles blend more readily with those of readers - as happens amongst friends.

3.2 On Friendship

Readers sometimes describe their interaction with Merton in terms of friendship, transposing the writer-monk's description (to Pope John XXIII) of his correspondence with intellectuals, mentioned in the previous chapter:

I thought of Merton and his 'apostolate of friendship' earlier this month while sitting at a pub one evening in England. I was in the company of a diverse collection of people [...]. Strangers before this evening, those with whom I found myself at the pub all began to exchange stories about how each had come to discover the writings of Merton and what had led them to attend this three-day event. [...] Few writers and thinkers can bring people together this way. Even fewer can do it long after their death.³¹

Bochen and Shannon, when introducing their compilation of selected letters, reflected on Merton's 'apostolate of friendship' whilst being careful to avoid speaking too readily of

³⁰ Williams, 'A person that nobody knows', p. 19. The article first appeared in *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978), pp. 399-401, and was reprinted in *The Merton Journal* 9.2 (2002), pp. 46-47.

³¹ Daniel P. Horan, 'Friends of Merton' in *America: The National Catholic Review* April 28-May 5 2014 (Washington DC: America Press, 2014), <<http://americamagazine.org/issue/friends-merton>> [accessed 12/05/14].

friendship between readers and Merton, who could nevertheless reasonably express

friendship towards unknown readers – including, presumably, future readers:

to all my friends | to the old ones and the new ones | to those who are near and those who are far away | to those on earth and those in heaven | to those I know and those I have never met | to those who agree and those who disagree | to those I have never heard of | in the hope that we may all meet in the one light.³²

This expansive declaration of friendship seems to encompass present-day readers. For a writer to extend friendship to unknown readers is one thing; and for readers to discover friendship with one another is unremarkable; but for readers to speak of friendship with Merton is less straightforward, because ‘friendship is reciprocal – it involves at least two’.³³ Whereas we might love without being loved, ‘friendship is quite different. I might say I love Nelson Mandela, but I cannot say that he is one of my friends’ because to ‘be a friend is to have a friend’.³⁴ A degree of actual mutuality and intimacy is assumed in the notion of friendship. It is a particular form of relating and communicating. Without contravening this notion of mutuality, Liz Carmichael describes a shifting understanding of Christian friendship-love in relation to a present-day context of rapid and intensive communications:

We can conceive of the world rather as twelfth-century Cistercians conceived of the monastery, as the milieu in which [...] growth in love must replace the culture of violence in personal, social and political life. The praxis of friendship requires that in addition to forming friendships with people close by, we should make efforts to cultivate a much wider network of deepening friendships in different continents and cultures, from which to gain understanding so that we may approach all people with respect and sensitivity. Where walls of division have been put up, we should ask ourselves and the others: what do friends do together? And start doing these things, at every level. Friendship is a strong and practical concept of love.³⁵

³² *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. v.

³³ Janet Martin Soskice, ‘Friendship,’ in David F. Ford, Ben Quash and Janet Martin Soskice (eds.), *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 167-181 (p.169). The next quotations in this paragraph are from the same page.

³⁴ Soskice, ‘Friendship’, p. 169.

³⁵ Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 199. Carmichael offers a concluding ‘simple analytical framework’ around her work, whose ‘elements are: (i) All love concerns relationship, either actual or potential; ii) Friendship is the central case of relationship; iii) The love of

Carmichael could be describing Merton's own evolved practice; but present-day readers, accepting Merton's addressing them as friends, simply cannot participate in a 'praxis of friendship' with Merton himself. There is no actual or potential mutuality. If Merton evokes in the reader a sense of being 'befriended', then a proper response, consistent with the practical, incarnational emphasis of Carmichael and extending the 'upward spiral' of Merton's letter-writing, can be manifest only in the details of inspired friendships with other actually-present people, which (in specifically though not exclusively Christian terms) suggests a vision of the good life as 'one in which we have learned how to be for each other, and in so being to live fully for ourselves.'³⁶

3.2.1 'Those Who Knew Him Best'

Secondary literature and conversation around conferences indicates that occasional disputes have been provoked by ways in which people who have not known Merton personally, speak as though they were or are familiar with him. It is unsurprising that friends should respond to what are perceived to be distortions of the actuality of the Merton they remember; but for present purposes what is most interesting is the epistemological question raised, and its bearing upon our discussion of interaction with a literary persona and the ways in which that interaction can mimic interpersonal exchange. Those who knew Merton personally add texture to our understanding of his personality and life-world. For instance:

he would go to the storage room for an old bishop's suit and exit from the monastery looking very ecclesiastical, so as not to shock the gate brother. A few miles, and he'd say

friendship has three aspects: (a) ontological – it is grounded in shared being, (b) deontological – it is goodness expressing itself in action, (c) teleological – it is directed to the other (to God, or God's creature) with a view to fulfilment in mutual joy' (Carmichael, p. 199).

³⁶ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2007), p. 110.

‘Stop here.’ He would go into the woods, take off his bishop’s suit, put on his blue jeans, his old sweater, and his beret, and get back into the car with a sigh of relief. Then we would head east, stopping, I must confess, at a few rural beer parlours along the way; Tom was always very popular with the local farmers. He knew how to talk to all kinds of people – they found him funny and they liked him.³⁷

Whatever their capacity for interpreting the man, or communicating what they know, friends and associates of Merton had a privileged position from which they might critique anything that researchers and commentators deduce from his writing. At the same time, he evidently reveals through writing things unspoken even to a close friend. Different ways of knowing have intermingled throughout the years since Merton died.

Honouring actual friendships, Paul Wilkes entitled his book of transcribed interviews *Merton By Those Who Knew Him Best*.³⁸ The superlative prompts questions, such as how we would compare the ‘knowing’ of a hypothetical friend who rarely read Merton, with that of an empathetic younger reader of Merton’s every published thought. Eccentric, distorted or factually incorrect readings of Merton can be challenged by a careful reader as well as by close associates, though the affirmation of a friend can cement a connection between historical life and imagined or reconstructed persona. On the front page of a website about ‘The Thomas Merton we knew’, Jim Knight asked, ‘What is the real face of Thomas Merton?’ Beneath the question he wrote:

Over the years, the scholars, the followers, publishers, the church itself, had drawn a portrait that was unrecognizable, that of a plastic saint, a monk interested mainly in pulling nonbelievers, and believers in other faiths, into the one true religion. This was not the Merton that his friends from younger days and later days, Jim Knight and Ed Rice, knew.³⁹

³⁷ James Laughlin, in *The Way it Wasn’t: From the Files of James Laughlin*, ed. by Barbara Epler and Daniel Javitch (New York: New Directions, 2006), p. 188.

³⁸ Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984).

³⁹ William James Knight, ‘The Thomas Merton We Knew’ at <www.therealmerton.com> [accessed 02/06/18].

The actual sources of the unrecognizable portrait to which Knight referred were not specified, but the protest highlights sensitivities surrounding interpretations of Merton. Whilst the personal testimony of friends is not necessarily more reliable or accurate, there is something troubling about a person being portrayed in a way which is unrecognizable to those friends. In his intriguing and affectionate reminiscence of the friendship between Edward Rice, Robert Lax and Merton, James Hartford recalled some of the disputes over the public presentation of Merton. Regarding their plans for a film (a project which came to nothing in light of Paul Wilkes' *Merton: A Film Biography*),⁴⁰ Hartford quotes Rice expressing to Lax 'an awful feeling of frustration, plus sadness, at the way these people going (Michael Mott, Tony and Theresa Padovano, Wilkes, DiAntonio, Hobbel &c &c). No one seems to have read Mutton, just looking for a quick summary from someone else'.⁴¹ The mood of a friend grieving over misrepresentation is understandable, as are frustrations about what evidently felt like a rush to summarize, and perhaps to profit from, a complex life. Rice produced his own biography of Merton, subtitled 'an entertainment, with photographs' and published under a title which was once the working title of a novel that Merton never brought to completion: *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*.⁴² Lax was highly complimentary on receiving the paperback edition of Rice's book:

i'm reading, rereading it now: best book ever written about Moto, and one of the best about anyone... what is good is that if you had written just for yourself, or for you, me, Moto & Freedgood, as a memory book, you couldn't have stuck more closely to the

⁴⁰ *Merton: A Film Biography*, prod. By Paul Wilkes and Audrey L. Glynn (First Run Features, 1984, FRF911108D).

⁴¹ James Hartford, *Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 233.

⁴² Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harvest / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985). The book was first published in Garden City, NY by Doubleday in 1972.

pertinent facts. as far as i've read, there's no time spent in talking to an imaginary reader. these are the things you'd want to say to yourself or a couple of friends.⁴³

Lax appreciated the fact that with Rice's work there is 'no time spent in talking to an imaginary reader'.⁴⁴ The reader instead is given the impression of listening in on the reminiscences of close friends, as readers 'listen in' to Merton's correspondence or, in a somewhat different way, to his journals. Hartford recalls how tension arose between Rice and Lax over another project, an oral history involving interviews with people who knew Merton. When Rice thought up the idea, it transpired that such a project was already underway, overseen by Victor Kramer as editor of *The Merton Annual* - and Lax had been interviewed for it. Rice wrote to Lax: 'Now I been going round like some dumb innocent, pushing Harford to raise money, writing letters to rich old ladies, when it has already started and you are a contributor. At least you could have told me [...]. I feel like some damn flatfooted horse's backside.'⁴⁵ A veil may be drawn over disputes between friends and publishers, or disputes about control and finance, but they are more than peripheral to discussion of reader reception of a legacy which is openly and thoroughly interpersonal.

Accuracy is one thing, emphasis another. A portrayal may be challenged as misrepresentative on the basis of other evidence, whereas technically accurate versions with sharply contrasting emphases continue to co-exist alongside the monk's own range of self-representations. Merton may have regretted the abiding impressions left by *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but was able to recognize that the book had a life of its own.⁴⁶ In *Jonas* he wrote of moving on, whilst at the same time reflecting on becoming 'public property'; which

⁴³ Harford, p. 240.

⁴⁴ Harford, p. 240.

⁴⁵ Harford, p. 242, citing a letter from Rice to Lax, 24 July 1987.

⁴⁶ See 'First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface', in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. vii-xii

is where Knight's point becomes problematic. Merton's self-representations became available to people other than his close friends, such that it seems reasonable to speak of knowing Merton without being over-cautious about disrespecting his actual friends. What we might do more intentionally, alongside Merton, is to sit lightly to definitive emphases which pre-interpret a body of literature and the life behind it in such a way as to restrict the kind of interpersonal interaction which more faithfully extends his distinctive public praxis into present contexts. At the same time, our understanding of Merton is best framed by continuous attention to the basic, verifiably definitive practices of monastic secession and communicative writing, and to the writer-monk's descriptions of the motivations for and meanings of those actions.

3.2.2. Merton's Vocation to More Than Friendship

Merton sought to move beyond the range of dominant, invasive aspects of collective thinking and, in doing so, also moved away from everyday patterns of friendship. Actual, particular friendships continued and remained vital to Merton. However, we rightly hesitate to speak too lightly of friendship with the monk who understood his vocation as demanding more: 'It is because I want to be more to them than a friend that I become, to all of them, a stranger.'⁴⁷ Merton became *l'étranger*, the outsider. He estranged himself in order to be differently present 'by hiddenness and compassion', thereby learning to know other people 'not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and eluded strangers, but as identified with myself'.⁴⁸ In the next chapter, I will say more about Merton's movement beyond ordinary social patterns of friendship, towards an estrangement which not only made possible the

⁴⁷ Merton, 'Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain: Nanae no yama* (1963)', in *Thomas Merton: Reflections on my Work*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Fount, 1989), pp. 68-76 (p. 75).

⁴⁸ Merton, 'Nanae', p. 72.

distinctive type of interpersonal engagement experienced by numerous readers, but which also reframes interpersonal encounters within a politically-charged eschatological counter-narrative.

3.3 Fragmentation: Subjective Interactions and ‘Many Mertons’

It is not always apparent how one can represent fairly the writer-monk whose own narratives do not necessarily submit to a reader’s desire for a plain account of ‘what happened to Merton’. Mario Aguilar introduced his 2011 study of Merton with the observation that:

If Merton is a very complex person and a very complex writer, those of us attempting to write and to interpret him come up with many different ‘Mertons’ and many different approaches to his contribution to the life of the Church and the issues that preoccupied his contemporaries.⁴⁹

The idea of ‘many Mertons’ was implied by Mott in his official biography almost three decades earlier, in relation to the monk’s actual friends and acquaintances:

What might have amused Thomas Merton most were the different ‘Mertons’ others brought to his burial, and who have been argued over ever since. There is a special paradox in this: he had written so much in an effort to reveal himself. Some of these Mertons are obvious distortions. There are Mertons who had very little of the human in them, where he had much. Equally, there are Mertons who would never have spent a week at the monastery. But for some of the lesser distortions, he would probably have held himself responsible, though they baffled him in life and have outlived him.⁵⁰

This notion of ‘many Mertons’ crops up regularly. Morgan Atkinson, when researching his film on Merton, discovered in interviews that ‘there were many Mertons running free’.⁵¹

The same idea was expressed a little differently by Cunningham:

‘What Thomas Merton are you interested in?’ he asked. ‘Are you interested in Thomas Merton the monk? Are you interested in Thomas Merton the literary critic? Are you

⁴⁹ Mario I. Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Mott, p. xxi.

⁵¹ Morgan C. Atkinson, ed., *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 8.

interested in Thomas Merton the poet? The social justice person? The person of peace? The guy who writes on spiritual theology? There are many Merton's, at least from the perspective of his writings.⁵²

It is unsurprising, given the nature of the literature and the life of its author and subject, that contrasting impressions of Merton circulate, or that certain versions become prominent or captivate particular readers. In relation to how Merton continues to engage readers, the idea of 'many Mertons' is, however, problematic. The problem here perpetuated by Cunningham is in separating the various elements by implying multiple Mertons, thereby circumventing or collapsing one aspect of the dialectical tension at the heart of Merton's historical and continuing witness. There was one historical life, through which many streams flowed, in which diverse elements came together, in relation to which many people and ideas continue to meet. The different perspectives on Merton are themselves nodes in a web of interaction and relationality, indicative of multiple relationships rather than of multiple Mertons. The problem is solved simply by referring to many perspectives, portraits or emphases, rather than many Mertons. Then we also retain a clear differentiation between representations and the (actual but unavailable) historical life which is the essential unifying event in relation to which these contrasting representations cohere.

William Shannon wrote, in his 2005 updated introduction, not of many but of two Mertons existing in the popular imagination during the author's lifetime, each representing a familiar aspect of a life which was too infrequently seen as a complex whole:

The two 'Mertons' – the contemplative monk who wrote so splendidly about prayer and the inner life, and the social and literary critic, who had taken another and more compassionate look at the world he thought he had left – had not yet come together in many people's minds in 1968. At the present time (in the early years of the twenty-first

⁵² In Atkinson, *Soul Searching*, pp.8-9.

century) this dualistic perception of Merton, while still persisting in the minds of some, has to a large extent been overcome.⁵³

Shannon went on to say that these popular readings of the contrast between a (young, monastic) Merton focused on prayer and interiority, and a (mature, engaged) Merton focused on social and literary criticism, in due course gave way to a more widely accepted recognition of the compatibility, indeed the necessary connection, between contemplation and compassion. He did not, however, go so far as to interpret Merton's dedicated contemplation, study and monastic rhythms as being *in themselves* actions with social and political meaning and consequence. Yet Merton's movement to the monastery (which began his immersion in formative, contemplative disciplines and community) was always more than flight and disengagement. The publishing ensured that his reorientation, secession and contemplative immersion would be public actions, read in relation to the socio-political context into which they were delivered. Merton's being a monk, continually telling of struggles to hear and to respond to a divine counter-melody, is enough to establish a form of dialectical tension which pulls open a space wherein the eschatological, prophetic traditions of Jesus can resonate.

In the introduction cited above, Aguilar states that 'any study of Merton's writings, diaries and letters assumes a twofold dimension: the knowledge of his life and contribution to a period within Christianity and his own society but also a mirror to our own actions and reflections in society today'.⁵⁴ This is one way of describing the relationship between scholarly study and interpersonal engagement. Aguilar is a monk, so the mirror analogy may

⁵³ William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), p. 128. The book is a revised edition of Shannon's *Something of a Rebel* (1997).

⁵⁴ Aguilar, *Political*, pp. 1-2.

be more appropriate than for those of us who are not, for whom Merton is less of a mirror, more of a counterpoint.⁵⁵ It is our various re-presentations of Merton which are more like a mirror, reflecting elements of our projected selves or particular preoccupations that we find when reading Merton. When these subjective representations of Merton or selections of his work remain in dialogue with one another and subject to proper care and scrutiny, then Merton continues to work with us in a way which can be curtailed by too quickly fixing an approved telling of the story or an 'essential' collection of readings – or by accepting the idea that there are many Mertons.

Monica Furlong's was the first full biography of Merton. Her *Merton: A Biography*⁵⁶ met with mixed responses. Victor Kramer, for example, wrote in 1987 that Furlong's book 'focuses on high points in Merton's life, and the resulting picture is a life full of crises. It is as if Furlong sought a book with a hero – tortured, frustrated, disappointed, but strong – and she found him in Merton.'⁵⁷ Kramer acknowledged that the crises are certainly part of the story, but 'Merton himself often wrote about the other facets of this life; monasticism with all of its problems brought pleasure, satisfaction, and, above all, movement toward union with God and man in a way not readily available outside a monastery'.⁵⁸ The problem, as he saw it, was about emphasis and selection. Kramer compared Furlong's biography with Ed Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, in which Rice (according to Kramer) 'makes a martyr out of Merton while minimizing the strength of his interior life' and, in the case of Merton's

⁵⁵ This may be too definite. Merton uses mirroring in several ways. In 'The Tower of Babel', for instance, 'The city of men, on earth, is the inverted reflection of another city. What is eternal and unchanging stands reflected in the restless waters of time, and many of the events of our history are simply movements in the water that destroy the temporal shadow of eternity' ('The Tower of Babel' in Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1957), pp. 29-64 (p. 58).

⁵⁶ Harper and Row, 1980.

⁵⁷ Kramer, *Monk and Artist*, p. 171.

⁵⁸ *Monk and Artist*, p. 171.

moving to a hermitage, gives ‘only one version of a story which Furlong qualifies significantly’.⁵⁹ One of Robert Waldron’s biographical books on Merton, described by a reviewer as ‘essentially a sideshow’, was also criticized for emphasizing the dramatic:

Those for whom Merton is a guide, mentor and friend will be uncomfortable with Waldron’s somewhat pitiful, doubt-ridden, self-castigating version, even if he does eventually admit, in a final ‘Coda’ that, ‘In his last 1968 journal entries he (Merton) appeared to be a far happier, far more whole man than the fragmented one who first entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941’.⁶⁰

The review reflects something of Waldron and something of the reviewer, Larry Culliford, who repeated the idea that ‘there are many Thomas Mertons’ and that each of us has our own version. Factual, textual inaccuracies are rightly subject to correction, whilst some presentations are challenged on other grounds, such as Culliford’s perception of Waldron’s distortion of a more full-bodied picture. Culliford then went on to assert a conviction that ‘the life, writings and teachings of Thomas Merton have value only insofar as they contribute to a person’s psychological, and especially spiritual, development; insofar as they encourage us towards mindful awareness, enabling us to discover Christ, the True Self within’.⁶¹ This is no less of a subjective evaluation, in this instance of the *use* of Merton, rather than of his personality per se. Culliford perpetuates not only the idea of ‘many Mertons’, but also the spurious idea of ‘a more whole man’, a slippery notion linked with particular ways of reading progressive development towards an abstract notion of ‘completeness’. It is as difficult to imagine the characteristics by which we interpret a person as whole, as it is to imagine a complete biography or portrait of Merton.

⁵⁹ *Monk and Artist*, p. 171.

⁶⁰ Larry Culliford, review of Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), in *The Merton Journal* 19.1 (2012), pp. 48-50. ‘Essentially a sideshow’ is at p. 50.

⁶¹ Culliford, review of Waldron, p. 49.

Faced with the apparent problem of ‘many Mertons’, the ambitious biographer or interpreter might nevertheless be inclined to aim for integration, a sense of completeness. Victor Kramer, for instance, described Furlong’s biography as providing a ‘valuable intermediary step’ towards the ‘complete biography’ he once envisaged.⁶² It is difficult to imagine what a ‘complete biography’ might be. The idea seems to assume, for example, that all of Merton is available as text, report or relic. Whilst the sheer volume of material available as journals, notebooks, letters, teaching notes, manuscripts and sundry published items does leave the impression that there is little left out, it is Kramer who, as an editor of the raw journals, noted the occasional nature of Merton’s journal writing. His output was immense, but it is far from a complete record of a life lived and thought. Even a complete assimilation of all that is known about Merton seems outlandish. Neither is it clear what would be gained by accumulating and ordering details which, in the end, still call for judgements about the relative weight and significance of episodes and of very different kinds of writing. A ‘complete biography’ is no more available than a universal perspective, or indeed of ‘final integration’ if final means complete.⁶³ The aim for a more complete portrait or understanding implies a finite subject with at least a theoretical endpoint, the idea that Merton could, for example, be fully known.

Chronological reconstruction (of the life of the author, the development of his ideas, the reception of his writings or talks and so forth) is one of numerous ways of getting to know Merton. A sequential organizing of his writing, reading or other activity has value in relation to particular tasks such as a study of the influences on his developing thinking, or an enquiry

⁶² Kramer, *Monk and Artist*, p. 171. Kramer’s 1987 addition to his 1984 book helpfully chronicles ‘Merton and Scholarship’ to that point.

⁶³ ‘Final Integration – Toward a “Monastic Therapy”’, in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971), pp. 205-17.

into his participation in specific socio-historical events or networks of actual relationships. A different approach, which also takes account of changes in the knower, follows from recognition that our getting to know Merton is an incremental and cumulative affair which need not assume a movement towards completeness.⁶⁴ Other reading strategies, derived from aspects of the author's own literary method and style, more reliably extend into the present the distinctive communicative action which characterized Merton's historical public witness. Going beyond a flat reconstruction, readers are invited to trust in a revelatory grace which sustains tolerance for paradox and contradiction.⁶⁵

Subjective and shifting impressions are par for the course, and together they constitute an intertextual field which, at best, extends the intertextuality of Merton's own output. The writer-monk can still mediate between readers whose contrasting perspectives potentially illuminate and extend not only an understanding of Merton and his sources, but of one another. To allow the idea of 'many Mertons' to become established is to reduce the clarifying potential, including the friction, between differing perspectives on Merton. Acceptance of the notion of multiple Mertons implies contentment with a perspectivalism which requires no interaction between the reconstituted portrayals and their varying emphases and intentions; but such a dismembering risks undermining attempts to perpetuate what the historical Merton was doing by bringing together, and abiding with, numerous sources, interactions, experiences. Multiple perspectives - like the divergent influences, sources and episodes held together as the body of literature - are unified by the fact of the author's life, the single somatic location. The corpus coheres around one

⁶⁴ Indeed, Merton opens *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) with a preference for 'endless inscription' (p. 3).

⁶⁵ 'First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface', in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. by Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. vii-xii (pp. x-xi).

historical person, whose life became a confluence - of ideas and authors, literary sources and actual persons, including readers who find through Merton a kind of resonance with the author and with one another. Whilst few of us will have time or inclination to read the full Merton corpus (and no amount of reading would ever attain to a full knowledge of the actual life), we nevertheless do well to keep in mind some sense of the singular, expansive life with its myriad unique interactions, and the overarching story whose subject is not, in fact, 'an interesting and original personality, but the story of one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world'.⁶⁶

In an illuminating retrospective, Kramer pointed out how scholars can reinforce the 'progressive' model, if only by implication. He expressed in the 2003 essay some ambivalence about aspects of the editing process, and discussions about that process, amongst those (including himself) assigned to work on what he described as Merton's 'raw' journals. One thing Kramer questioned was the assigning of titles to the published editions, titles which individually and together imply that the journals are narrating a continuous overall *progress* throughout Merton's life, with 'quite distinct positive patterns as this personal narrative unfolds'.⁶⁷ Kramer, who worked on the journals of 1960-1963, noted how the later volumes include more of the kind of elements which do not readily fit the form of pre-determined or recognizable notions of 'progress' evident in earlier journals. Entries in the earlier journals are generally unsurprising for readers already familiar with *Jonas* or *The Secular Journal*, as though the author was observing 'clearly structured positive rhythms' or

⁶⁶ Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Victor A. Kramer, "'Crisis and Mystery": The Changing Quality of Thomas Merton's Later Journals', in Patrick F. O'Connell, ed. and intro., *The Vision of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), pp. 77-97 (p. 77). Kramer warns (p. 79) that 'as readers, we should be aware that the organization of this publishing project does affect how we read it and how we think about Merton.'

‘discernible patterns suggesting spiritual progress.’⁶⁸ Later journals, however, include ‘sometimes frustrating, even unclear’ entries which, according to Kramer, indicate a ‘shift in strategy which reveals his acceptance of mystery’,⁶⁹ a shift in style already evident soon after 1953, when *Jonas* was published. That publication marked the beginning of a decade of what Kramer calls an ‘increasing awareness of his changing sense of vocation and of a developing awareness and responsibility about the world concerning issues of war, political power, race, peace, and even in regard to the relationship of Cistercian monasticism to the church’.⁷⁰ Merton was at the same time (according to Kramer) becoming less concerned ‘with private worries, plans and desires’ as ‘he begins to put considerable stress on letting patterns which cannot easily be explained emerge in their mystery as journal entries’.⁷¹ There is a sense that, by the early 1960s, ‘the rules of censorship (self-imposed or otherwise) are lifted, and this writer begins to provide a journal which reflects more of his own contradictions and fallibility’.⁷² So it is that Kramer identifies a type of progressive development in Merton (‘as a user of words; as an observer of himself; and as someone increasingly aware of the relationship of his work to future readers in the years and decades to come’),⁷³ and a shift in emphasis over time (‘during the period from 1953 to 1963 [...] a gradual diminishment of the documentation of Merton’s ambition and the corresponding growth of his awareness of others and his awareness of insights offered to him’),⁷⁴ but

⁶⁸ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 78.

⁶⁹ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 78.

⁷⁰ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, pp. 78-79. Kramer makes no mention of economics or media culture in this list, both of which were also important to Merton.

⁷¹ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 78. Merton was clearly concerned about plans and desires in 1966, when he thought about the implications of falling in love. Having achieved his plan to live in a hermitage, Merton went on to plan the realization of his desire to travel. What does diminish is, for instance, imagining moving to another Order or House – the kind of disruptions which illustrate Merton’s tendency to establish an imagined utopian counterpoint to present circumstances which he experiences as dissatisfying.

⁷² Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 79.

⁷³ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 89.

⁷⁴ Kramer, ‘Crisis and Mystery’, p. 89.

challenges the imposition of journal titles which pre-interpret and thereby constrain understanding of periods of Merton's life or aspects of his work. The same point could be made about identification of 'essential' writings or of pivotal events (or pseudo-events). I will return to this theme in Chapter Six.

We might interpret such shifts in emphasis or style in various ways; for example as indicative of changes in Merton's understanding of how writing in fact yields insight or meaning – not only for himself, or indeed not necessarily for himself at all, but possibly for other readers who continue working with his texts. If, after 1960, 'Merton is becoming attuned more and more to how he must continue to write to get at the essence of a moment':⁷⁵ he is also well aware that his writing is part of a corporate process in which readers and writers can find meaning *and connection* through and with one another, in a way neither controlled or even predicted by the author. It seems that the later work in particular resists a notion of completeness in preference for a contrasting, corporate process of endless inscription.⁷⁶ Talk of 'wholeness' may be misleading or may simply lack graspable substance.

The aforementioned Waldron, with his Jungian perspective, is another who describes the trajectory of Merton's story in terms of wholeness. His method is to filter Merton through a different type of established interpretative framework, showing how Merton exemplifies (in this case) a process of individuation. Picking up a biblical archetype dear to Merton, Waldron writes:

⁷⁵ Kramer, 'Crisis and Mystery', p. 87.

⁷⁶ This phrase is taken from the prologue of Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 3.

Jonas' archetypal sea journey serves effectively as a paradigm of Jung's theory of individuation. All people are called to wholeness (God's summons to Jonas). The call may come at any stage of life, but it is strongest at mid-life. Too often we do not heed the summons, often deliberately escaping wholeness by evasion (Jonas' traveling to Tharsis).⁷⁷

Whatever we make of the suggestion that Jonas models individuation, the language of 'wholeness' seems to be being *defined* here in terms of 'God's summons to Jonas'. That Jonas evaded his commission is clear enough, and that some people evade steps towards individuation is credible, but the connection between the two is not apparent, and the language of wholeness adds nothing to the argument. To talk of Merton's movement towards 'wholeness' seems superfluous.

Merton does use terms and ideas which suggest movement towards completion or an endpoint – from the early poem 'Wholeness' to the late adoption of the idea of final integration. Further, he works with accounts of the religious life shaped according to progressive models of movement towards an endpoint: from the Dantean ascent through purgatory towards paradise, John of the Cross and *The Ascent to Truth*, and other forms of movement towards sanctity, purification, holiness or enlightenment. Mingled with these 'progressive' models, however, are other notions such as the recovery of spontaneity, capacity for self-offering, and episodes of renewed insight which are more about the confluence of events, reading, memory and emotion which modify or overturn previous ways of seeing and thinking. These and other dynamics (such as the interplay between a feeling that something is missing, and episodes of affective release) are not dependent on notions of progress.

⁷⁷ Robert G. Waldron, *Thomas Merton in Search of his Soul: A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991), p. 83.

Inchausti rightly cautions against the desire for a ‘complete’ grasp of Merton, whose ‘work has yet to be – and perhaps never will be – fully understood because it is not so much a set of ideas as a domain of interior experience’.⁷⁸ Merton is certainly more than a set of ideas. He is also more than a domain of interior experience. Attempts to distil either the ideas or the interiority from less tidy or seemingly superfluous detail only distance readers from reminders of the lived reality which alone holds together the disparate elements of the corpus in potentially revelatory tension.

3.4 Concluding Remarks: When Reconstructing Becomes Participating

This chapter began with Merton’s late, gloomy reflections on the kind of intimacy he imagined readers to be seeking through his writings, and on what he remembered with disappointment and regret about past failures in romantic or sexual intimacy. As a priest, Merton was living his privacy in public, and peculiarly so as a writer. His communicative writing became increasingly relational in intent, most evidently through personal letters. He anticipated that many of these letters, along with private (uncensored) journals and other material, would become available for future readers, amplifying the prospect of quasi-interpersonal engagements between readers and an imagined Merton. Whilst the single historical life was (we infer) a confluence of ideas, sources and interactions (and the single corpus of material represents the same), so readers’ subjective perspectives on Merton are connected as a common discourse which, at best, brings to mind a prior connectedness and eschatological hope, communicated through biblical testimony which Merton mediates.

⁷⁸ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton* (Albany: State University of New York, 2014), p. 7.

For his 2014 publication, Gordon Oyer researched and reconstructed what is referred to as the 1964 'peacemakers' retreat' at Gethsemani Abbey.⁷⁹ For all that the remarkable study gives us in terms of the detail of the meeting itself and the circumstances of its happening, what stands out in relation to the primary focus of this thesis is a relatively brief testimony to how the work impacted on the researcher, how Merton's historical praxis extended into the praxis of a present-day reader.

The experience of reconstructing this story cannot help but affect its writer. One cannot enter into such a world of deep and sincere reflection on the place of protest without being confronted by hard questions about one's own responses to social ills. Much that surrounds us starkly contradicts the insights fostered by biblical narratives and spiritual truths as I have grown to understand them. The process of compiling this narrative often elicited an unsettling cognitive dissonance that challenged and prodded for more consistent effort to better illuminate and challenge those contradictions.⁸⁰

Oyer's immersion in the web of relations, memory and continuity surrounding the 1964 gathering included extensive conversation with participants - experiences unavailable to the general reader. The actual interpersonal engagement and fostering of relationship is by no means inconsequential, and through Oyer's work these have become part of the web of exchanges emanating out from the earlier period of interactions, conversation, study and attention to socio-political and cultural currents. The researcher's own prior commitments not only motivated and shaped the study, but also tempered the outcome. In similar fashion, the outcome of our reading of Oyer (in this instance) is influenced by our prior dispositions, motives, social location and the like. For example, we may be content that our knowledge and appreciation of the Merton to whom we already relate is enhanced; or we may go on to carry forward the intellectual debate about war or technology; or we may identify analogous present-day concerns, or specifically identify with one or other of the

⁷⁹ Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

⁸⁰ Oyer, p. xvi.

participants in those events. We might even be prompted or inspired to prepare an equivalent meeting; and so on. These responses are subjective.

Oyer, as it happens, focused less on acts (of protest) than on ideas about and motives for protest. The ideas and motives matter because 'actions of protest can seem superficial and lack integrity when we do not understand what we act against or fail to reckon with our motives for doing so'.⁸¹ Merton's extensive work brings before readers his perpetual reflecting on precisely these matters which, as Oyer testifies, potentially facilitates our own attention to the same. In the next chapter I scrutinize how it is that Merton's primary communicative act, his becoming a monk, opens up the critical space in which readers allied to Christian traditions are invited to delve into the complexities of motive, effectiveness, and what it is we might be acting against when faced with social crisis and indicators of dehumanization.⁸²

⁸¹ Oyer, p. xvii

⁸² This term is used repeatedly by Merton. For instance, he wrote in a letter of 21 June 1963 to Miguel Grinberg: 'It is a great misfortune that the technological blindness of the 'advanced' countries should gradually be spreading everywhere, without necessarily bringing any real benefits, and communicating mostly the severe disadvantages of our state. The world is falling into a state of confusion and barbarism, for which the responsibility lies, perhaps, with those who think themselves the most enlightened. [...] The problem is the dehumanization of man. The Marxists could have developed this concept, which is found in Marx, but they have not been able to. On the contrary, the world today seems to be in a maniacal competition between giant powers, each one striving to show it can do more than the others in brutalizing, stupefying and dehumanizing man, in the name of humanism, freedom and progress. Indeed, the frankness with which the Nazis built their extermination camps is to some extent the index of what is more secretly going on everywhere.' (*Courage For Truth*, pp. 196-97 (p. 196).

**CHAPTER 4: READING MERTON'S DEFINING MOVEMENT
AS PUBLIC, POLITICAL PRACTICE**

Much that is spelled out in later books and articles is already implied in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. But it cannot really be seen until it is found in more articulate statements – or perhaps more cryptic ones, like *Atlas and the Fatman*.

Thomas Merton, *'First and Last Thoughts'*, 1962.¹

By walking out of the circle in which they had lived hitherto, by making palpable, both in their dress and in their living a secluded way of life in special colonies, their opposition to any kind of comfortable worldliness or cultivation of self interest, so that they might dedicate themselves utterly to the religious idea, they brought home once more with unmistakable severity to a nation that had become too flabby and soft, that 'life is not the highest good,' and that there is something greater than earthly progress and the enjoyment and multiplication of worldly goods.

Walter Echrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1961.²

¹ Thomas Merton, 'First and Last Thoughts: An Author's Preface' in *Reader*, pp. vii-xii (p. vii).

² Walter Echrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 326-27, cited in John Eudes Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 13.

In a pub in Oakham, close to where Merton went to school, a well-versed and long-term reader was arguing that Merton's being a monk is of no real consequence when it comes to gaining insight, encouragement, inspiration or perspective from the writings. More than a quarter-century earlier, I was speaking with Msgr William Shannon in his office in Rochester, New York, when he mentioned a young couple who visited, one of whom had said 'I don't believe in the Church, even in Christianity: I believe in Merton!' Neither position is tenable without reinventing Merton. He comes to us as a Catholic monk, whose writing is expression and extension of his monasticism, his definitive movement from one social context to another. Merton remained grounded in his primary vocational decisions 'to be a Christian, to be a monk, to be a priest'.³ Sympathetic readers, who share some of his concerns and perspectives, are faced with the unequivocal fact of Merton's secession/immersion and his sustained separation from mid-twentieth-century mainstream American society. There is also the fact of his unwavering (if critical) identification with the Catholic Church and the Trappist Order.

This chapter is about Merton becoming and remaining a monk. His movement into monastic community living, and his remaining with the ensuing formative processes and struggles, constitute a prolonged faith-based action which, through his publishing, became (especially from 1948 onwards) public action. It is as a monk-writer that we know Merton. The multi-layered process of conversion to Catholic Christianity and discernment of vocation has been told and re-told in great detail by Merton and others. Indeed, the theme occupied the first two chapters of my earlier dissertation about Merton.⁴ The current research was

³ Merton, 'Nanae', p. 71.

⁴ 'From Contemptus Mundi to Real Presence: Thomas Merton's Relation to the World, A Study in Moral Development' (University of Birmingham, MPhil, 1994).

prompted in part by some dissatisfaction with that earlier work, which did not take adequate account of socio-political dimensions of Merton's vocational discernment, or some of his later reflections on the two pivotal works, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *My Argument with the Gestapo*. I was unduly influenced by the idea that Merton at some point 'returned to the world', having previously (as he wrote in a critical take on *My Argument* in March 1951) 'ridiculed, then spat upon, and at last formally rejected' that world.⁵ There are other ways in which Merton tells the story and evaluates his movement and his early work. There is no need to talk of Merton's 'great return' (a phrase used by the pre-eminent Merton scholar William Shannon in a chapter of his authoritative *Silent Lamp* called 'Return to the World, 1958'),⁶ or to continue interpreting an affective episode in March 1958 as the beginning of 'an alternative spiritual trajectory'.⁷ Merton's 'flight' was not simply an escape or a retreat into concern for personal salvation. Notwithstanding the increased attention to 'public issues' during his final decade, Merton never returned to that from which, for reasons of faith, he had sought to be separated. The point matters for several reasons, not least of which is the enduring dialectic between proximity (or intimacy) and distance which characterizes the mode of Merton's continuing communication with present-day readers, and a way in which he cultivates and supports our abiding with an underlying eschatological tension.⁸ The idea of 'return' (presumably to the social location of non-monastic readers, or to commonly understood ways of engagement and notions of effective action) can collapse

⁵ *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), p. 312.

⁶ William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 178.

⁷ Ephrem Arcement, *In The School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), p. 201.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Jossua in *The Condition of the Witness*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1985), writes: 'The eschatological verve of Christianity – the expectation of the ultimate – is itself preserved by the substitution of enforced, mutilating suspense with a patient, peaceful vigilance, when the imminent coming of the kingdom becomes incessant, when tension is succeeded by attention. We find that this distance which is unbridgeable (though we are promised that we shall overcome it), this future void which calls us and compels us to go on, is already there, or infinitely close and always keeping its distance' (p. 35).

a creative tension which is potentially revelatory and transformative. In this chapter, I am re-visiting aspects of Merton's telling of his movement to the monastery, with attention to his interpretation of that movement as constructive engagement with the social crisis in which it took place.

Merton entered the limelight with a dramatic story of faith-based transition from one dominant framework of meaning to another, a movement from one way of being in the world to another.⁹ He departed from a social location experienced as harmful, and as hostile to his being the better self his recently confirmed Christian faith promised and demanded, into a sharply contrasting environment established for the primary purpose of loving God and neighbour in humility and obedience.¹⁰ The Trappist life of relative poverty in community, sustained by and for rhythms of prayer, reading, and manual labour, required renunciation of (other) personal desires and ambitions in order to be free to follow Christ.¹¹

⁹ 'With us it is often [...] a case of men leaving the society of the "world" in order to fit themselves into another kind of society, that of the religious family which they enter. They exchange the values, concepts and rites of the one for those of the other' (Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 9-10).

¹⁰ In response to a request for a 'message of contemplatives to the world' from Pope Paul VI via Dom Francis Decroix, the abbot of the Frattocchie monastery near Rome, Merton immediately wrote a personal statement in which he said that when coming to the monastery he 'came in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which there was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation, that [he] could not remember who [he] was.' He went on to make clear that his 'flight from the world' was neither a reproach to those who do not follow suit, nor a purely negative repudiation of the world. Such attitudes would have taken him 'not to truth and to God but to a private, though doubtless pious, illusion' (letter of 21 August 1967 to Dom Francis Decroix, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), pp. 154-158 (p. 156)). On other occasions, such as his final talk on 10 December, 1968, he described the separation in terms of a broader dynamic already mentioned in the main text: 'The world refusal of the monk is something that also looks toward an acceptance of a world that is open to change' ('Marxism and Monastic Perspectives' in Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and, James Laughlin. eds., *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. 326-43, (p. 330).

¹¹ See Saint Benedict's Rule, Chapter 4, in e.g. *The Benedictine Handbook* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), p. 21. Citing a letter from Pope Paul VI to the Abbot General on 8 December 1968, the 'Declaration of the General Chapter of 1969 on the Cistercian Life' concludes its post-conciliar statement on the work and ethos of the Order with a summary of its mission: 'to give clear witness to that heavenly home for which every person longs, and to keep alive in the human family the desire of this home'. See <<http://www.ocso.org/history/historical-texts/declaration-on-cistercian-life/>> [accessed 10 August 2017].

To that end, it was a liberating movement, despite episodes when it evidently did not feel liberating.¹² Merton became an enclosed monk ‘dedicated to seeking God’ and given over ‘entirely to prayer, meditation, study, labor, penance, under the eyes of God’.¹³ His dissociation from one way of being in society and immersion in another way marked a pivotal decision (followed by a stream of subsidiary decisions, dilemmas and discontent) about telos, liberty, focus of attention, formative influences, input and interruptibility, economic circumstances, lifestyle, conviviality, language worlds, forms of submission and modes of communication. It was and remains the primary intelligible action undergirding Merton’s active presence to readers.¹⁴

The fact of his monasticism permeates our reading. From the moment he gained public prominence with *The Seven Storey Mountain* to the day he died after addressing a religious audience in Thailand about monastic identity and practice, Merton wrote and spoke repeatedly about the meaning of his intentional marginality, whilst regularly querying his own perceptions and motives, and criticizing aspects of his particular monastery and of monasticism more generally.¹⁵ Along the way he sometimes fantasized about leaving

¹² In an earlier summary of this movement, Merton wrote that ‘flight from the world’ is just a way of describing ‘a movement of liberation, the acquiring of a new and higher perspective, at the price of detachment – a perspective from which the mystifying, absurd chaos of human desires and illusions gives place not to an a priori dogmatic symbol, but to a concrete intuition of providence and mercy at work even in the natural constitution of man himself’ (Preface to *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), pp. vii-xii (p. xii)). He expresses contrary feelings, of not being liberated, for instance on 2 October 1967 (*Learning to Love*, p. 296).

¹³ Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), p. viii.

¹⁴ On the idea of ‘intelligible action’ rather than simply ‘action’ as a determinative notion see e.g. Stanley Hauerwas, ‘Habit Matters: The Bodily Character of the Virtues’ in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 158-175 (p. 159). The matter of intelligibility was a prominent concern for Merton. A good example of his dealing with the question of intelligibility late in his life is the correspondence between Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether (*At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. by Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995)).

¹⁵ In ‘The Solitary Life’ (in *The Monastic Journey*, ed. by Patrick Hart (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1978), pp. 197-210), Merton describes how the hermit in particular can ‘out of loyalty to mankind, and without

Gethsemani, and considered a range of other (monastic) vocational options; yet to the very end of his life, with a final talk reaffirming the necessary marginality of the monk, Merton sustained the monastic separation and priestly role which was the heart of his communicative action. Throughout his work there is a consistency about monasticism being intentional secession from divisive and dehumanizing social forces and cultural trends in order to be differently immersed and connected, and to combat personal, inward manifestations of those forces and trends.

Our perception of the significance of the consistent act of separation-for-connection can be obscured, however, if we are unclear about what Merton was separating from or for. His writings trace an evolving understanding, and an adequate interpretation of his separating-and-joining needs to take account of several interwoven strands in the literature. It is also helpful to recognize the enduring influence of impressions left by the likes of a potentially misleading summary on the dustjacket of the first edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which proclaims the book as ‘the extraordinary testament of an intensely active and brilliant young American who decided to withdraw from the world only after he had fully immersed himself in it’. This is not false, but a powerful pre-interpretation. Merton’s early rendition of the actual process of conversion and transition recounts the ways in which perceptions, moods and ideas eventually crystallized as a conviction that he give himself over to the formative potential of a life of obedience, relative poverty, self-restraint, fraternal silence, contemplative submission, disciplined meditation and study.¹⁶ The influences which were

a spirit of bitterness or of resentment’ (p. 199) reflect back ‘our natural obsession with the visible, social and communal forms of Christian life which tend at times to be inordinately active, and become deeply involved in the life of the secular non-Christian society’ (p. 197).

¹⁶ In *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* (London: Burns & Oates, 1957) Merton writes: ‘The great end of the monastic life can only be seen in the light of the mystery of Christ. Christ is the centre of monastic living.

shaping Merton's religious, monastic identity were yet to percolate down into the more complex blending of his later years, in which he would also need to take account of the distorting effect of intense and prolonged public attention to *Mountain* (due to its commercial success and wide distribution) and a popular interpretation of the author's vocation which became overly 'fixed' in the public imagination.¹⁷ What is not described on that first edition dustjacket is precisely what Merton was withdrawing from, or indeed entering into. The notion of 'immersion in the world', like the idea of withdrawal, is assumed to carry self-evident meaning.¹⁸ How might the book have been read if it were introduced as, say, the author's outworking of baptism through contemplative immersion in the silence, literature and practices of a Christian monastic community? Merton's own telling of the story has from the outset been condensed and filtered by publishers, distributors and commentators.¹⁹

On 8 December 1967, a year before his death, Merton recorded a message for nuns with whom he had spent the previous day, in which he reiterated the importance of monastic separation as an intensified, distilled form of Christian contemplative living. Notwithstanding the fact that the Christian message is for everybody, he reasserted the necessity of what he called 'communities like ours where everything is lived in a very simple,

He is its source and its end. He is the way of the monk as well as his goal. Monastic rules and observances, the practices of monastic asceticism and prayer, must always be integrated in this higher reality. They must always be seen as part of a living reality, as manifestations of a *divine life* rather than as elements in a system, as manifestations of duty alone' (p. 8).

¹⁷ See his early reflections on this and the projection of readers, in 'Jacob's War', in *The Merton Seasonal* 33.3, pp. 3-8.

¹⁸ See Chapter 6 of this thesis for comment on Merton's reflections on misreading of 'the world, the flesh and the devil' in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

¹⁹ Andrea Lynn Neuhoff produced a fine thesis on this process, 'The Unedited Thomas Merton: Autobiography to Autohagiography' (Bachelor's thesis, Reed College, 2005). Neuhoff concluded that the removal by censors and editors of a significant amount of personal information turned the autobiography into more of a generalized morality tale.

very pure and very intense form without the dilution and the sort of evaporation' associated with more dispersed, secularized versions of Christianity.²⁰ Merton encouraged the sisters not to be turned aside from a 'special kind of fidelity' with its 'concentration upon the purity and perfection of the central Christian experience of Christ dwelling in us, the Holy Trinity living in us'. He urged them to continue cultivating 'something that is so true and so real', not in a defensive manner but as a deepening of awareness of the love of Christ. For this, 'a certain distance' and 'a healthy sense of limit, of boundary' is required. 'Not the false, artificial boundary of the iron grille and all that, but nevertheless a clear sense of identity' with limits defined by 'the striving of our love' and 'by the Holy Spirit, by an intuitive sense of what fits our deepest aspirations, and our deepest tending to union with God'.²¹ The cloistered life intends preservation of a 'self-respect and capacity to love by not letting it be confused and dispersed in what is completely irrelevant to it'.²² As this recording and numerous writings make clear, his later writing on political, social and cultural themes do not imply a dilution of Merton's commitment to a separated life.

In practical terms, Merton was to most people, for most of his monastic life, distant and unavailable; but his distance was not simply a matter of geographical proximity or physical walls. It was about his having elected to change his way of participating in a dominant form of social organization, through committing to a contrasting form. Present-day readers are

²⁰ See transcript of recording of 8 December 1967 in Appendix 2. Merton's meaning is illuminated by, for instance, his short essay, 'The Cell' (in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 252-259), where he writes that 'it is from the vantage point of the particular solitude in which I meet and discover His Name for myself that I can understand His presence everywhere else. Thus the reason for stability in solitude is that the hermit goes wandering out of solitude in the world, the "presence" of God may remain as an abstraction which he *knows* but which no longer experiences in all the concreteness that is demanded and that is possible when the Name is present in the cell. True of course the Name goes with me wherever I invoke him, and dwells in my heart everywhere, but this is thanks to the cell' (p. 252).

²¹ 8 December 1967, in Appendix 2, as is the next quote.

²² See Appendix 2.

still confronted by the reality of Merton's separated living, despite heightened impressions of intimacy which accompany greater access to Merton's informal writings. He remains distant, with a distance magnified by his death, his absence from our shared chronological time and public concerns.²³ It is this dialectical tension between intimacy and distance which I see as central to present-day reception of Merton. It is a tension peculiar to sympathetic readers who recognize the logic of his counter-cultural commitment, and of the effective force of that action and his ways of writing out of it, yet who do not make an equivalent move. We abide instead with the creative tension generated by this particular, wholehearted and full-bodied response to intuitions of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, made known through prophets and ancestors, through biblical counter-narrative.

The remainder of this chapter is an exploration of two autobiographical books which introduce, in contrasting ways, Merton's definitive movement into monastic living. The second is the more famous, a transposition of the earlier autobiographical project into the recently-adopted idiom of his Cistercian context. Both books retain clear indication of the author's understanding of his movement to the monastery as constructive response to (rather than evasion of) violently dehumanizing socio-cultural trends which manifest most explicitly as war. If this line of interpretation is correct, then the body of monastic work, rather than tracing a simple overall movement from withdrawal to engagement, in fact traces a continuous, intelligible action which is responsive in more complex ways to the

²³ In a straightforward sense, readers can simply no longer write to Merton in expectation of being read, or read his direct response to current events or cultural developments. This is not a comment about the more philosophical questions of time, concurrence and communication which Merton opens up, directly and indirectly. He mentioned reading, for instance, Loren Eiseley, *Man, Time and Prophecy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), whose second chapter begins: 'There is one profound difference which separates psychologically the mind of the classical world from that of the present: the conception of time' (p. 18). For a detailed reflection on Merton and time see Ross Labrie, 'Merton and Time' in *The Merton Annual* 11 (1998), pp. 121-137.

underlying currents or roots of urgent public concerns. The single, coherent vocational response is obscured if the various elements are too readily or too rigorously separated into pre-defined categories or time periods. Which is not to say that this type of organizing is not useful; just that Merton's writings on mysticism and contemplation, social issues, monastic renewal, true and false self, inter-religious dialogue, literature, everyday life and thought and so on are interwoven elements of a consistently determined struggle to live faithfully at the public interface of socio-political crisis and eschatological Christian traditions.

4.1 War, Communication and a Journal from No-Man's-Land

A significant source through which Merton reveals the meaning of his movement to the monastery is the manuscript he wrote a few months before that move. Personal journals from around the same period also contain pertinent insights, to which I will refer after consideration of the manuscript eventually published, in slightly modified form, as *My Argument with the Gestapo*.²⁴ This less well known (arguably neglected) autobiographical work was being finally prepared for publication during Merton's final year. He altered only lightly the work written during the intensive months before he joined the community at Gethsemani. Publication was eventually approved by the Procurator General two months before Merton died, and in July 1969 *My Argument* became the first Merton book published posthumously.²⁵ It is a product of both his pre-monastic and his late monastic years, in the sense that Merton in 1968 was keen to deliver this work into the public domain. In hindsight

²⁴ Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1969). Merton writes in the preface: 'I wanted to enter the Trappists but had not yet managed to make up my mind about doing so. This novel is a kind of sardonic meditation on the world in which I then found myself: an attempt to define its predicament and my own place in it.'

²⁵ I have written more about *My Argument with the Gestapo* in relation to our understanding of Merton's vocation in 'Totalitarismus, Krieg und Technologie: Mertons fortwährende Meditation über eine »universelle Krise des Menschen« in Wunibald Müller and Detlev Cuntz, eds., *Gegensätze vereinen: Beiträge zu Thomas Merton* (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme Verlag, 2015), pp. 28-48. I have included revised versions of parts of that essay in this current chapter.

it can be seen as bookending Merton's evolving thinking about connections between war, communication, perception and social interaction - and as framing his monastic life, however unintentionally. In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton dismissed it as the 'result of a psychological withdrawal', but by February 1968 he recognized it as coming 'from the center where I have really experienced myself and my life. It represents a very vital and crucial - and fruitful - moment of my existence'.²⁶ The work captured a 'moment of breakthrough', the likes of which he hoped to find once again: 'I won't have many more chances!' he told himself.

Merton carried the manuscript with him when others were destroyed or dispersed. In the late 1960s he worked determinedly for its publication. This fact could be interpreted in several ways, but in light of clear and repeated comments about ways in which readers bound Merton to a caricature associated with *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it makes little sense to suggest that he would have persisted in publishing another early 'novel' if it contained views and ideas he would then have felt obliged to explain or dismiss. A more reasonable conclusion is that *My Argument* voices something Merton wanted to be heard in 1968. Writing was a highly dynamic process for Merton, who habitually created books out of material he had written earlier. There are edited journals such as *The Sign of Jonas* or *A Vow of Conversation*, or the tapestry which is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. The popular *[New] Seeds of Contemplation* went through several major revisions, and essays in edited compilations such as Merton's favourite *Raids on the Unspeakable* made their debut

²⁶ Journal entry for 8 February 1968, in *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 7, 1967-1968*, ed. by Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 51. Quotations in the next sentence are from the same entry and page.

elsewhere.²⁷ Whilst it is not unusual that one of the projects that Merton was working on throughout the last year of his life revolved around a manuscript written during the summer before he joined the Trappists, it *is* unusual that he hardly changed the original work.

Whilst acknowledging it to be ‘a document of a past era’ (insofar as it came from a time before the full extent of Nazi atrocities and destruction was publicly known), *My Argument* nevertheless reveals the author’s early engagement with concerns such as the relation between structures of language and structures of society, between control of collective thinking and herd-like behaviour, between worldview and violent outcomes. It tells of his early engagement with issues of media control, autonomy and interdependence, and with totalitarianism. These were themes of Merton’s final years, as well as of the period of his transition to the monastery. With a playful seriousness which probes, breaks down, restructures and opens up public discourse, *My Argument* is a creative seedbed of the sustained, prophetic engagement to come, a re-tuning of vocabulary and syntax to the pitch of a poetic monasticism and contemplative communication. A thread runs all the way from the macaronic journal to Merton’s reading of Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Ellul and Roland Barthes, his re-reading of Kafka and love of Camus, and his epic *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*.²⁸

²⁷ On the development of *Seeds of Contemplation*, see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian*, Toronto Studies in Theology 20 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1984). See Appendix 1 for a recollection by a confrère of Merton’s writing process.

²⁸ Merton’s final collection of poems, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) has been focus of considerable scholarly attention. Mott (xxiv) notes the continuity or circularity of form and content which the almost-synchronous publication of these two creatively autobiographical (or ‘anti-autobiographical’) works represents. Comparing the work with *My Argument* on 8 February 1968, Merton wrote that ‘*Geography of Lograire* may in parts have some of the same sardonic vitality, but with much more involvement and complexity’ (*Other Side*, p. 51).

4.1.1 Retrospective: On Not Evading a Universal Human Crisis

In June 1968, Merton informed his friend and literary agent, Naomi Burton, that the manuscript she had first seen twenty-seven years previously now had a new title, and suggested it could be subtitled, 'A Macaronic Journal, 1941'.²⁹ Inasmuch as autobiography is a type of creative fiction, we can take Merton's description of this 'macaronic journal' at face value.³⁰ Naomi Burton writes in her 'Note on the Author and This Book' of her initial concerns about trying to sell an imaginary journey through England and France at a time when so many writers and reporters were in fact experiencing the war first-hand. To further complicate matters, Merton's writing challenged allied propaganda and popular mythologies of besieged yet defiant England. His macaronic style, blending several European languages in a double-speak all his own, did not help his cause in those early attempts to become a published author. In the event, the work emerged against the somewhat different backdrop of the late 1960s, landing amidst the resurgence of interest which followed the author's death.

In 1968 Merton introduced the work, 'dreamed in 1941', as 'an attempt to define [the world's] predicament and [his] own place in it'.³¹ He recalled that this was the period during which he had 'wanted to enter the Trappists but had not yet managed to make up [his] mind about doing so'.³² *My Argument* is a creative sketch of Merton's inner landscape at a

²⁹ The OED defines 'macaronic' as: 'denoting language, especially burlesque verse, containing words or inflections from one language introduced into the context of another.'

³⁰ In his *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), T. R. Wright quotes Roland Barthes on the fictiveness of his own autobiography: 'I do not say "I am going to describe myself," but "I am writing a text and I call it R.B."... I myself am my own symbol' (Wright, p. 93, quoting *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 56). Whether or not Merton can be described similarly as his own symbol is discussed in Chapter Five. See below on Merton's 1968 essay, 'Roland Barthes – Writing as Temperature.'

³¹ *My Argument*, p. 10.

³² *My Argument*, p. 10.

time when his religious response to human crisis and violent conflict was taking shape. The journal is an imagined odyssey set in the England and France of 1940 and 1941, during a summer when Merton was actually living in New York State. He was writing himself into a different place, into the heartlands of his European origins. He was discerning vocation in relation to war-torn origins, thinking and writing his way through the received categories and restricted vocabulary of nation-states and ideological abbreviation, seeking out the actual battle-lines within and between people. As a monk he would continue the quest for authentic ways of speaking and not speaking, of being rightly possessed rather than craving possession, of progressing into a freedom which begins with surrender and constraint rather than with assertion and domination.

The working title for the book had always been (until mid-1968) *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, though Merton barely encountered European Nazis at all. The book is not so much about encounters with Nazis as ‘about the crisis of civilization in general’ and ‘the awareness that, though one may or may not escape from the Nazis, there is no evading the universal human crisis of which they were but one partial symptom’.³³ Merton in 1968 was telling the reader that this book demonstrates that his going to the monastery was no evasion or escape.

4.1.2 Representative Excerpts from a 1941/1968 Fiction

The content and style of *My Argument* can be illustrated by reference to a few excerpts, which I consider here in connection with the 1968 context into which Merton was preparing to publish, rather than the context of initial production.

³³ *My Argument*, p. 10.

In the final chapter, Merton is in Paris. It is the summer of 1941. Returning to his hotel room, he finds a man waiting. The man's radio is crackling with reports of death and destruction, in a crazed blend of German, English, Italian, French. He is there because of reports that Merton has been writing memoirs, which the man warns may land him in Dachau. Merton is bemused. Writing is censored; private and inventive words must be concealed. The man is offering to help him escape Paris. Merton says: 'I have not finished the work I came here to do. Besides, I am not trying to escape from the same kind of Nazis you are, exactly. I do not think it necessary for me to leave'.³⁴ The man asks why Merton would stay. 'I have only finished the first of a series [of journals]', replies Merton.³⁵ 'Get it out of the hands of the Nazis, or you are lost,' the man warns.³⁶ The Nazis think they have decoded the journal by mathematical formulae. But there is nothing here which can be reduced to numbers, nothing to compute; just an unfamiliar way of thinking and speaking.

The visitor seems to want to help and, seeing that he intends to stay, offers Merton his own job as correspondent for all newspapers, and commentator for all broadcasting companies. Merton thinks him crazy: 'I do not write your way', he says; because 'that kind of writing only makes me feel silly and ashamed of myself'.³⁷ But does Merton not love freedom, the visitor wonders? Does he not want to counter German propaganda with his own reporting? 'If there exists a kind of freedom that can be advanced by bad writing,' he replies, 'I don't want any part of it. Here's how much I like freedom. I'll take your job and write in my own way: more journals. They can take it or leave it!'.³⁸ The exchange has a

³⁴ *My Argument*, p. 255.

³⁵ *My Argument*, p. 255.

³⁶ *My Argument*, p. 255.

³⁷ *My Argument*, p. 256.

³⁸ *My Argument*, p. 257.

particular resonance in light of the early criticism of the personal nature of Merton's writing, repeated in some quarters after the release of his private journals.

This fictional debate about notions of freedom resonates with events in May 1968. Shortly before he finally sent off the *Gestapo* manuscript for publication, Merton was leading a conference at Gethsemani with a gathering of contemplative prioresses. There had been preliminary plans for Martin Luther King, Jr. to make a retreat at the monastery around that time, but King had been assassinated on 4 April. In those intensive days (for people of Vietnam and China, France and Czechoslovakia, Black America and the post-conciliar Church), Merton began his conference by discussing the prophetic aspect of contemplative monastic vocation, and the failure of 'so-called prophetic movements' which, he thought, were too readily assimilated into American society. In other words, said Merton:

we're living in a totalitarian society. It's not fascist in a political sense, but in the way that it's economically organized. It's organized for profit and for marketing. In that machinery, there's no real freedom. You're free to choose gimmicks, your brand of TV, your make of new car. But you're not free *not* to have a car. In other words, life is really determined for everybody.³⁹

The implication is that, in 1968, Merton's monastic vocation was no less than a refusal to be assimilated into a society revolving around profit, marketing, and deceptive or inadequate notions of freedom. He remained alert when those same trends seemed to be creeping into the life of his particular monastic society. The social-economic machinery from which he distanced himself included the kind of hegemonic media control which, in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, is represented by the single commentator-correspondent feeding all newspapers and broadcasting companies. In conference with contemplative sisters, Merton

³⁹ 'Contemplative Life as Prophetic Vocation' in Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. by Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1992), pp. 129-142 (pp. 129-130). The previous quote is from p. 129.

referred instead to the makers of television programmes, who seem to care only for 'all the *technical* expertise that goes into them'.⁴⁰ More important than what is in front of or passing through the camera, is the machinery itself. 'This is the system that calls for some kind of prophetic response'.⁴¹ It is a system in which technique over-rides content. In linking fascism with systems of profit, marketing and technological expertise, Merton was reading the structures of his adopted American society as the totalitarian system which called for prophetic response.

A little more than six months later, on his last day, 10 December 1968, Merton was addressing another monastic audience about the nature of that prophetic response: 'The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures.'⁴² So 'there has to be a dialectic between world refusal and world acceptance' where 'the world refusal of the monk is in view of his desire for change'.⁴³ It may have comforted some of his more stony-faced listeners when Merton identified a fundamental difference between the monk and the Marxist, where: 'the Marxist view of change is oriented to the change of substructures, economic substructures, and the monk is seeking to change man's consciousness.'⁴⁴ He was speaking not just of the monk's consciousness but

⁴⁰ *Springs*, p. 130.

⁴¹ *Springs*, p. 130.

⁴² 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives' in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, pp. 326-43 (p. 329)

⁴³ *Asian Journal*, pp. 329-30.

⁴⁴ *Asian Journal*, p. 330. Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland recalled the context of Merton's final address in 'Thomas Merton's Bangkok Lecture of December 1968' in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (2008), (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press), pp. 91-99. Benedictine and Cistercian superiors in Asia invited superiors of the founding monasteries in Europe and the United States to a meeting on the theme of inculturation. Other well-informed participants were invited to oil the conversation, including Merton. 'It is important to emphasize that this Bangkok meeting was not understood as a dialogue with Asian monks. Rather, it was to be a preliminary discussion among Western monks before such a dialogue could take place' (p. 92). There were however monks and nuns present from India, Ceylon, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. There was tension in the air, with significant absences from the meeting and others resistant to the theme. There was 'a pall over the assembly' before Merton spoke on 10 December, due to a challenging talk by the Jesuit Jacques Amyot, whose message Weakland summed up as 'The people here have

of human consciousness. Structural change follows change in perception, orientation and desire. He reminded the (chiefly monastic) audience that, as he saw it:

Both Christianity and Buddhism agree that the root of man's problems is that his consciousness is all fouled up and he does not apprehend reality as it fully and really is; that the moment he looks at something, he begins to interpret it in ways that are prejudiced and predetermined to fit a certain wrong picture of the world in which he exists as an individual ego in the center of things. [...] This is the source of all our problems.⁴⁵

Earlier that year he had been working on the macaronic journal where, in a more freewheeling style, he had taken up a similar theme, the potentially catastrophic outcomes of predetermined and ossified ways of reading the world and one another:

You think you can identify a man by giving his date of birth and his address, his height, his eyes' color, even his fingerprints [...] Men become objects and not persons. Now you complain because there is a war, but war is the proper state for a world in which men are a series of numbered bodies. War is the state that now perfectly fits your philosophy of life: you deserve the war for believing the things you believe. In so far as I tend to believe those same things and act according to such lies, I am part of the complex of responsibilities for the war too.⁴⁶

In terms of this logic, engagement with matters of worldview and ego-consciousness, beginning with self-awareness, is a direct engagement with the roots of war. Merton's fictional persona suggests to his interrogators that if they truly want to know who he is, they begin by asking - and by listening: 'But if you want to identify me [...] ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for'.⁴⁷ Details matter: to ask what a person is living for is to risk discovering commonalities, hopes and motives common to interrogator and interrogatee, even if

no need of what you have to offer and no context in which to place it' (p. 95). Weakland recalled his displeasure and the confusion of others about Merton taking the conference in another direction with his theme, 'Marxism and Monastic Perspectives', which 'did not belong in the context of this meeting and was not geared to the needs of the participants in the face of the problems they were confronting' (p. 95). Merton was not so much speaking about inculturation as its opposite.

⁴⁵ *Asian Journal*, p. 332.

⁴⁶ *My Argument*, p. 160.

⁴⁷ *My Argument*, pp. 160-61.

system and circumstance designate them enemies. Detail matters because detail can disrupt imposed structures which set people against one another. Detail can also reveal oppositions, even amongst those who are herded into battle as though brothers in arms. Even amongst those who identify with the same Church. The brief, fictional conversation about detail signals a key to interpretation of Merton's relational practice and his prioritizing of personal detail and interpersonal exchange over generalization, abstraction and certain forms of collective thinking.

The scene from the early novel seems to betray a lingering individualism which would evolve into the more liberated autonomy of Merton's later work, refined by contemplative attention and community life.⁴⁸ If individualism does indeed linger here, it is neither solipsistic nor anarchic: the protagonist rebuts the accusation that he is questioning the very idea of society, and makes clear that what he is challenging is the way in which its founding principles are described. Again, detail matters. In a scene set in London, 1941, Merton had returned to where he was staying, the house of Madame Gongora (an enigmatic figure whose name alludes to the kind of intricate and obscurantist literary style in which parts of *My Argument* are written). Gongora is a citizen of Casa, of Home.⁴⁹ At her home, two

⁴⁸ The theme recurs throughout Merton. He writes, for example, in the Preface of *Disputed Questions*: 'The great error of our time is the delusion of "humanism" in a culture where man has first been completely alienated from himself by economic individualism, and then precipitated into the morass of mass-technological society which is there to receive us in an avalanche of faceless "numbers." Under such conditions, "humanism" is nothing but a dangerous fantasy' (p. xi). In an essay first published in the same year ('Theology of Creativity' (1960) in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, ed. and intro. by Patrick F. O'Connell Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), pp. 86-101) Merton writes: 'The need for spontaneity, for spiritual freedom, for personal growth, is certainly urgent: nothing more so. But when "creativity" and "personalism" slide into the context of popular mythology, they are not going to help us achieve this end. On the contrary, they may all too easily frustrate it. It should not be hard to see that this thoroughly understandable and commendable idea of personalist creativity has been corrupted by the mass media. Once corrupted, it is no longer creativity, but mere wishful thinking' (p. 90).

⁴⁹ One of the best treatments of *My Argument* is in Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1979). Labrie describes Madame Gongora as symbolizing 'the apolitical transmission of civilized values' and as 'a sybil who prophesies in macaronic language' (p.34). In a

strangers are waiting to interrogate Merton. They seem to be English officers, but speak a macaronic tangle of European languages, including German. They could in fact represent any of several warring nation states. The visitors challenge Merton on his nationality (his passport identifies him as a native of Casa, like Madame Gongora) and his attitude to institutions, laws, and society: 'You can't live without laws and regulations,' says one of the inquisitors. '... I realize that society has a definite place and a function, sir, indubitably,' replies Merton. 'But there is another order, a higher order?' they ask. Merton answers: 'There are two orders, the order of law and the order of freedom, and I'll give you two guesses which one I think is the more important.'⁵⁰ And so the conversation continues, as Merton narrates his way toward the kind of freedom he had glimpsed in the highly regulated life of Gethsemani Abbey during an Easter retreat that year.

In the closing chapter, Merton's avatar responds to the representative of a war-time media system by simply refusing to write in the language of the system, and by committing to keep on writing candidly from the heart. He knows that his writing will sound strange to many ears, but it is the only kind of writing that his integrity will allow. He is choosing one language-world over another. As the scene draws to a close, Merton entrusts his journal to the media man (who cannot quite work out whether the author is pro-British or pro-German) and watches with anguish as the book is smuggled away, 'in the hands of a maniac

world of war and illusion, hers is a home in which illusion and truth can be distinguished, says Labrie. Her name and speech, however, suggest she represents obscurity or mystification.

⁵⁰ *My Argument*, p. 156. Later resonances with this theme are found in e.g. *Conjectures*: 'The obsession with institutionalism and organization is something the Church has doubtless caught, to some extent, by contagion with modern pragmatism' (p. 307). Merton goes on to write: 'Obviously there must be "durable institutions" and there must be organization. But love is more important than organizations and a small, apparently insignificant and disorganized circle of friends united by love and a common venture in Christian witness may be of far greater value to the Church than an apparently thriving organization that is in reality permeated with the frenzies of activist and ambitious wilfulness' (*Conjectures*, pp. 307-08).

who believes he understands world affairs, political rights and wrongs, and what is going to happen in the war'.⁵¹ It is a costly thing to let the book go, knowing not whether it will be lost or destroyed. He releases his heart ('Apartate de mi, corazón!'), knowing that an authentic language of the heart will not be understood within the dominant framework of socially-accepted terminology and sentimentalism, proposition and pragmatism, war and manipulation. He has written for the angels to read, and that's how the journal ends.

In May of 1968, with the actual book on its way to the publishers, Merton was talking with the contemplative gathering at Gethsemani about a prophet being called to 'get out of a certain kind of society or social structure'.⁵² In the macaronic journal, he had been imaginatively re-visiting war-time European societies, trying to discover clues to understanding connections between social structures, attitudes and worldviews. For Merton, leaving a particular kind of social structure had meant getting away from an overbearing social discourse, from domineering ways of thinking. As the novel ends, Merton's alter-ego refuses the offer of the media controller's role, which would require him to adopt and promulgate the distorted language of a corrupt and dehumanizing system. Six months after writing this narrative, he belonged to the monastic community at Gethsemani, and would remain distant from a dominant form of social structure for the rest of his life. His separation was not alienation, but its opposite.

Naomi Burton retrospectively noticed the 'signs of his growing interest in the monastic life', which had passed her by when she first read the manuscript in 1941.⁵³ She writes that

⁵¹ *My Argument*, p. 259.

⁵² *Springs*, p. 131.

⁵³ Naomi Burton, 'A Note on the Author and This Book' in *My Argument*, pp. 11-15 (p. 15). The next quote is from the same introduction.

Merton had 'come full circle'⁵⁴ – which, in terms of writing style or technique, is a helpful assessment. In terms of vocational trajectory, however, the description is less clear if it implies that Merton moved away from, then returned to, a form of engagement we can see being worked out in *My Argument*. Merton's contemplative separating and communicating together constitute a consistent engagement (or 'anti-engagement' if we are to follow the pattern of his anti-poetry and anti-autobiography) with aspects of social living he later described more bluntly as totalitarian and alienating. In other words, his monastic immersion and his publishing seem to follow naturally from the kind of thinking evident in the macaronic journal. Merton's persistent grappling with the totalitarian undercurrents of the human heart and society are interwoven throughout a complex process of resistance and engagement, sustained and developed between the creation of *My Argument with the Gestapo* and its publication.⁵⁵

His portrait of dissent in *My Argument* is a complex one, realistic if whimsical about the problem of getting away from dehumanizing social and economic structures, even of *seeing* them for what they are. The seer is enmeshed in what is seen, and the probing light which illuminates the world also illuminates the language of the heart. Between manifest realities and their interpretation lie the distracting and obscuring effects of fears and hungers, propaganda and habitual thinking which Merton went on to articulate vividly in light of his later studies of theorists such as Marcuse, whose influence permeated conversation with

⁵⁴ Burton, 'A Note', p. 14.

⁵⁵ In Merton's final public talk he told a story (*Asian Journal*, p. 338) which echoed, and developed for a monastic audience, his dealing with the theme in 'Christianity and Totalitarianism' (*Disputed Questions*, pp. 127-148) where he writes: 'A mass-movement readily exploits the discontent and frustration of large segments of the population which for some reason or other cannot face the responsibility of being persons and standing on their own feet' (p. 133).

the sisters gathered at Gethsemani in 1968. It is Marcuse (also present in his final Bangkok talk)⁵⁶ who reinforced Merton's conviction that a person enmeshed in the dominant social discourse is at risk of alienation, and energized sentences which could have been a mature commentary on the opening paragraphs of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

One of the central issues in the prophetic life is that a person rocks the boat, not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who *think* they're free that they're slaves. That's an unacceptable message. There's nothing new about telling the blacks that they're having a rough time. The prophetic thing in this country is to tell white people that they need the blacks to be free *so they'll be liberated themselves*. Few people say this. James Baldwin does. [...]. If we're going to live up to our prophetic vocation, we have to realize that, whether we're revolutionary or not, we have to be radical enough to dissent from what is basically a totalitarian society. And we're in it. It's not a society that's coming, it is here.⁵⁷

This totalitarian society is not 'fascist in a political sense,' but a society 'organized for profit and for marketing'.⁵⁸ Before producing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton had in *My Argument with the Gestapo* fictionalized a spiralling journey around truth and freedom, through labyrinths of language in which the narrator sought coherence between action, thought and emotion, compelled by a longing to live authentically and vivaciously in the world as he knew it. Merton (like his fictional representation) could not simply align himself with nation-states and their campaigns; neither could he depart from their warring world. It seems that, during the summer of 1941, he was working out precisely what kind of world he

⁵⁶ Merton commended Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964) to his Bangkok audience (*Asian Journal*, p. 334).

⁵⁷ *Springs*, p. 133. Merton had in 1962 read James Baldwin's 'Letter From a Region of My Mind' in *The New Yorker*. A version was published in 1963 as *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin, 2017). When Merton responded on 19 July 1963 (in *Witness to Freedom*, pp. 165-66) to M. R. Chandler's questions from the *San Francisco Enquirer* about his reading, the one book he said everyone should read was Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. 'This is the most forceful statement about a crisis that is of immediate importance to every American, and indirectly affects the whole world today', he wrote. 'It is something that people have to know about. The Negro has been trying to make himself heard: in this book he succeeds' (*Witness*, p. 166).

⁵⁸ *Springs*, p. 129.

inhabited - and what it was that he wanted to distance himself from. In 1968 the underlying concern remained:

Are we going to get caught up in a society that is much more permissive than the rigid ones of Marxism but yet also totalitarian? This is never admitted, but it's true in the sense that everything important is really determined for people beforehand. What's left is trivial. You cannot make choices that really influence the society itself.⁵⁹

Merton identified Marcuse's idea of freedom as (he tells his contemplative sisters) 'the kind that we're constituted for'.⁶⁰ It is a freedom which entails suffering because it carries a heavy cost, 'the burden of feeling the contradiction in our world and Church and exposing them, insofar as we are honestly able to do that'.⁶¹ It is a freedom which entails a choice; in Merton's case a choice of voluntary poverty and a refusal to continue colluding with vacuous and destructive notions of freedom which continued warring long after 1945. His most well-known expression of that choice began with another description of freedom:

Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.⁶²

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, to which I will now turn, the author narrates quite differently his quest for freedom from violence, selfishness, fear and the 'self-contradictory hungers' which were as much a part of himself as any other person. The imaginative and playful style of *My Argument* renders it difficult to categorize, interpret or, perhaps, to take as seriously as the best-selling autobiography. In retrospect, however, we can see how Merton's first full-length prose work anticipated a monastic writing vocation which was no less than a

⁵⁹ *Springs*, p. 144.

⁶⁰ *Springs*, p. 144.

⁶¹ *Springs*, p. 157.

⁶² *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948), p. 3.

wholehearted and full-bodied response to the universal human crisis he was inscribing in that 'sardonic meditation' on the world in which he found himself.

4.2 Re-inhabiting Dantean Mythology, 1941-1946

Merton archived *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* when he entered the Trappist Order.

In a letter of 17 August 1946 to James Laughlin, whose *New Directions* had already published his *Thirty Poems* and was about to release his poetry collection *A Man in the Divided Sea*, Merton described a different autobiographical project, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as 'straight biography with a lot of comment and reflection', adding that 'I cannot make it in less than 650 typewritten pages'.⁶³ In a letter of 1 March that year, however, he had reported to Laughlin that he had been granted permission for 'a new project – creative, more or less poetic prose, autobiographical in its essence, but not pure autobiography, something, as I see it now, like a cross between Dante's Purgatory and Kafka and a Medieval Miracle play, called the *Seven Storey Mountain*'.⁶⁴ He anticipated a work of a hundred and fifty pages, with the proviso that if it is 'more prose than poetry it is liable to go much bigger'.⁶⁵ Five months later it was indeed much bigger, and, in October 1946, Merton sent the manuscript to Naomi Burton, having retained and reinforced the Dantean framework characteristic of *My Argument*, whilst minimising the influences of Kafka and Joyce and the sardonic, macaronic style of the earlier work.⁶⁶ He had found a new vocabulary or, perhaps

⁶³ David D. Cooper, ed., *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997), p. 11. Merton's references are to *Thirty Poems* (NY: New Directions, 1944) and *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

⁶⁴ *Merton and Laughlin*, p. 10.

⁶⁵ *Merton and Laughlin*, p. 10.

⁶⁶ On the Dantean influence in *My Argument*, see Patrick O'Connell, 'Merton's Early *Commedia*: Dante and *My Argument with the Gestapo*, in *The Merton Journal* 21.1 (2014), pp. 28-38. O'Connell deals chiefly with literary structure and influences. Anthony Padovano writes: 'The prose poetry accounts [...] for the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The autobiography is an excursion into a world of vivid experiences, lyrical encounters with life, mystical yearning. It is less the narrative of a life than the story of a soul or the song of a

more accurately, a new meaning-scheme, for defining the world's predicament and his own place in it, during a prolonged period of reorientation through contemplative immersion in the rigorous discipline of Trappist community life.

Having set aside the type of literary devices and obfuscations of his pre-monastic work, Merton wrote more plainly in *Mountain*, out of the 'creatively inhibiting situation of religious life' with its restrictions of censorship, and formative participation in a common life of liturgy, silence, labour and study.⁶⁷ During that period, Merton's world had become populated by the lives of 'the Cistercian Blessed and Saints', due in no small part to his being encouraged by Abbot Frederic Dunne, soon after entering the monastery, 'to make the Cistercians better known in the new world.'⁶⁸ It seems that Merton was doing little writing during those early years: there is poetry, including the two published collections mentioned. There are only twenty-five letters collected from that period; and from April 1942 until September 1946 there is no published prose, and no evidence of a personal journal. Towards the end of this period we have the letter to Laughlin about the autobiographical work which had been brewing. With Laughlin's guidance, Merton found a voice which resonated with a post-war readership.

poet or the symbol of an age. Its model is Dante and the intrepid journey to the light in the Divina Commedia. [...] *The Seven Storey Mountain* is Odysseus in a new key, longing for home...' (Anthony T. Padovano, *Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), p. 42). Padovano also describes *The Seven Storey Mountain* as 'an American *Pilgrim's Progress* [...] not only because of the introspective character of the search but because it deals effectively with the American temptation to substitute secular experience for spiritual substance' (p. 5).

⁶⁷ George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), p. 41.

⁶⁸ Patrick Hart, 'Introduction' in Thomas Merton *In the Valley of Wormwood: Cistercian Blessed and Saints of the Golden Age* ed. and intro. by Patrick Hart (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), pp. xv-xvii (p. xv). Merton wrote the preface in August 1954. Hart unearthed a letter in Dunne's files, from Merton for the Chapter of Cistercian Abbots meeting in 1946, which lists eight substantial writing projects already completed, and twelve more proposed. This was before the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when Merton had been less than five years in the monastery. See William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 132-33.

Ed Rice, a close friend from Columbia days, contrasted *My Argument*, with its 'sense of estrangement from the world, particularly in those very nostalgic, very alienated descriptions of London', with the later autobiography which, 'even with the highly developed ratiocinations and introspective meditations, is more objective'.⁶⁹ Whether or not *Mountain* can justifiably be called 'more objective', it is no less formulaic a construction designed to tell in a particular way of the author's journey towards relocation in, and perspective on, the world he knows. It is a book whose disproportionate influence Merton came to accept, though he was thereafter continually rearticulating (if not necessarily revising) the meaning of his shift in social, economic, cultural context – guiding readers away from the 'artificial public image' generated by the impact of *Mountain* and back to reading his separated, contemplative obedience as responsive to the violent, dehumanizing trends out of which his vocation had emerged.⁷⁰ Before access to the personal journals, and without *My Argument with the Gestapo*, the public meaning of the life of silent disengagement and contrary immersion may have been less apparent, but with *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton had deposited into the midst of a Cold War culture, with its logic of war and consumerism, the traces of a contrary life, a full-bodied and wholehearted commitment to contemplative Christian faith. He generated a virtual presence, projected from within earshot of Fort Knox, that symbol of a war industry and of the accumulation of wealth with which it is bound up. Whilst some responded by following Merton's lead into monastic living or other forms of alterity, most sympathetic readers evidently find other ways to assimilate the autobiography, and the socio-political significance of Merton's movement between social contexts, his becoming and remaining a monk. In doing so, there

⁶⁹ Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 7.

⁷⁰ *Reader*, p. 16.

is always the risk of losing sight of how *The Seven Storey Mountain* establishes his monastic vocation as, amongst other things, active response to widespread social crisis manifest as war. Further, in retrospect we can now see, irrespective of the author's intentions or expectations, that the publication into post-war / Cold War America of this contrary faith-story was laden with implicit challenge to a Church swept along by cultural mores, propaganda and political ideology.⁷¹

4.3 *The Seven Storey Mountain: Beginning and Ending with War*

Twenty years before his death, Merton had become widely known through the book whose opening paragraph tells of his being born in 1915 on the margins of a French war zone. It goes on to tell of his entering a Trappist monastery on 10 December 1941, three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour.⁷² It was on the same date twenty-seven years later that Merton died in Thailand, on the margins of another war zone. Immediately before its epilogue, which was written in 1947, *The Seven Storey Mountain* concludes with a poetic lament for his younger brother, reported missing in action on 17 April 1943.⁷³ Of his immediate family, Thomas was the sole survivor. In the book's epilogue he addresses God, saying: 'You have left me in no man's land.'⁷⁴

The kind of blurb which accompanied *The Seven Storey Mountain's* entrance into post-war America seems to have played a part in encouraging an interpretation of Merton's later

⁷¹ 'The words and examples of the Desert Fathers have been so much a part of monastic tradition that time has turned them into stereotypes for us, and we are no longer able to notice their fabulous originality. We have buried them, so to speak, in our own routines, and thus securely insulated ourselves against any form of spiritual shock from their lack of conventionality' (Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 10).

⁷² The day after the attack, the US Government declared war on the Empire of Japan. On 11 December, German leadership declared war on the United States.

⁷³ On *Mountain*, p. 404 is 'For My Brother, Reported Missing in Action, 1943' which had been published in April 1945 in *Catholic Art Quarterly*. The poem is included in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 35-36.

⁷⁴ *Mountain*, p. 420.

writings on social issues (war, fascism, racism, consumerism and so forth) as indicative of a dramatic 'return to the world' (presumably *from* the monastery identified as 'not the world') or as departure from an idealized form of detachment. The autobiography, however, expresses in its own way how Merton's monastic commitment was constructively responsive to social issues. In the opening lament, for instance, war is associated with a consumerism 'most people take for granted' whilst the war lament of the closing section (a poem for his brother missing in action) follows reflection on a Lenten fast.⁷⁵ There is parallelism and reversal. In both instances Merton is telling of a decision to live no longer 'in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers', a climate associated with war.⁷⁶ This is more than the testimony of a 'brilliant young American who decided to withdraw from the world'; it is a story of resistance and social contradiction.

War is referenced throughout the book. In a passage about the disorienting months before his baptism in November 1938, Merton recalls the mounting tension surrounding news of the German invasion of Czechoslovakia: 'The city felt as if one of the doors of hell had been half opened, and a blast of its breath had flared out to wither up the spirits of men. And people were loitering around the newsstands in misery.'⁷⁷ Writing shortly after the end of the war and some five years into his monastic life, Merton recalls being 'very depressed' and 'no longer interested in having any opinion about the movement and interplay of forces which were all more or less iniquitous and corrupt', for 'it was far too laborious and uncertain a business to try and find out some degree of truth and justice in all the loud, artificial claims that were put forward by the various sides'.⁷⁸ This is a more prosaic

⁷⁵ *Mountain*, p. 4 then pp. 400-401.

⁷⁶ *Mountain*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *Mountain*, p. 213.

⁷⁸ *Mountain*, p. 214.

version of a recurring theme in *My Argument*. Merton is not declaring a lack of interest in the war (indeed, it preoccupies his thinking) but in formulating opinion on the basis of information he sees as essentially corrupt, false or inadequate. All he could see was 'a world in which everybody said they hated war, and in which we were all being rushed into a war' at a pace which was making him ill. The internal contradictions of society 'were at last beginning to converge upon its heart' with no end in sight other than a future obscured 'by war as by a dead-end wall. Nobody knew if anyone at all would come out of it alive'.⁷⁹ Rather than entering the fray of military violence or of superficial debating of inadequate information, Merton had chosen a more direct engagement with the internal contradictions and interplay of forces of which he writes.

4.3.1 Individual and Collective in a Climate of War

The passage in *Mountain* continues with a related theme which runs through Merton's work up to and including his last speech in Bangkok, namely the relation between the individual and the collective. Merton had already encountered Etienne Gilson's dealing with the theme in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, a book cited in *Mountain* and his personal journals as playing a significant part in his intellectual conversion.⁸⁰ In light of the consequences of indiscriminate aerial bombardment, Merton reflected on the obliteration of distinctions between civilians and soldiers, then went on to ponder how his 'likes or dislikes, beliefs or

⁷⁹ Quotations in this sentence are all from *Mountain*, p. 214.

⁸⁰ On 27 November 1941 Merton wrote in his personal journal: 'Just how great a part a book can play in a conversion is questionable: several books figured in mine. Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* was the first and from it more than any other book I learned a healthy respect for Catholicism' (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 455). Merton also lists, as significant influences on his conversion, Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, Blake's poems, Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and G. F. Lahey's life of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

disbeliefs meant absolutely nothing in the external, political order'.⁸¹ In this order, 'the individual had ceased to count' and he 'would probably soon become a number on the list of those to be drafted'.⁸² With others incapable of making any sense of the situation, he 'simply stopped trying to cope with it, and refixed [his] focus on the ordinary routine of life'.⁸³

This is Merton's narrative reconstruction in 1946 of events and moods preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. He does not say directly whether by publishing he hoped to counter the widespread post-war anomie he had once feared.⁸⁴ The narrative itself moves on to a discussion in which Merton is challenged by his friend Robert Lax about what he wants to be. Merton recalls the exchange as pivotal.⁸⁵ Lax tells Merton that he should say he wants to be a saint.

4.3.2 Sainthood in a Climate of War

'I can't be a saint,' I said, 'I can't be a saint.' And my mind darkened with a confusion of realities and unrealities: the knowledge of my own sins, and the false humility which makes men say that they cannot do the things that they *must* do, cannot reach the level that they *must* reach: the cowardice that says: 'I am satisfied to save my soul, to keep out of mortal sin,' but which means, by those words: 'I do not want to give up my sins and my attachments.'⁸⁶

⁸¹ *Mountain*, p. 214. The 'numbers' reference as descriptive of a harmful mindset recurs throughout Merton. There are several prominent examples in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, right through to the 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', written 'in the hope that we can still save ourselves from becoming numbers' (Raids, p. 53). Merton's request for exemption from combatant duty in the army is discussed in 'Application for Conscientious Objector Status', ed. and intro. by Jim Forest, in *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015), pp. 24-29.

⁸² *Mountain*, p. 214.

⁸³ *Mountain*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ On 26 October 1940 Merton wrote in his journal: 'There is a fear, not that the war will end civilization, but that the reaction after the war will. Now everyone is keyed up to a great effort: but the fear is that, after all is over, everybody will fall down and die of a mortal lassitude and the sickness of disgust. Maybe everyone will just die of weariness and shame and hopelessness. That was what was frightening about France. As if they just gave up in disgust, willing to do nothing but die of accidie. Maybe the war will peter out and everything thereafter will rot with melancholy, beginning with Germany and England' (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 243)

⁸⁵ *Mountain*, p. 237.

⁸⁶ *Mountain*, p. 238.

Being a saint (according to Merton's poeticized recollections) involves more than doing what is deemed necessary to save one's soul. It is an intention with public consequences.

Merton's informal journals of the pre-war period indicate that he was, a year or so after the reported conversation with Lax, thinking about the role of the saint in relation to war.

Whilst living in New York in 1940, brooding over the impact of war on the Europe of his birth and youth, he wrote in his journal:

The only thing that can save us is an army of saints – and not necessarily Joan of Arcs or military saints. Where will they come from? Nobody can really say, except those who think about it seem to believe (like Maritain) the saints will come from the poorest of the laity, from the depths of the slums, from the concentration camps and the prisons, from the places where people are starving, bombed, machine-gunned and beaten to death. Because in all these places Christ suffers most.⁸⁷

There is no suggestion here that Merton was at that point thinking of himself as saint. He noted that Maritain expected saints to 'be found in a few religious orders – the contemplative ones'⁸⁸ but did not identify himself with the contemplatives, asking: 'the rest of us, what should we do? Fall down and pray and pray over and over to God to send us saints!'⁸⁹

This was more than eighteen months before Merton joined the Trappists. To his mind, hope for salvation from war rested with saints 'from the poorest of the laity, from the depths of the slums, from the places where people are starving...', but Merton did not number amongst these. Neither were they options he could choose. If he were to choose to be part of the means of salvation from war, then the only option available to him from his recollection of Maritain's list is a contemplative religious order. He had not yet made that connection explicitly, but a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani the following year left

⁸⁷ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 223. The next quotes in this paragraph are from the same entry.

⁸⁸ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 222.

⁸⁹ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 222.

abiding impressions. By the autumn of 1941, having taken up an invitation to work in Harlem amongst some of the poorest people of New York, Merton remained agitated that whilst he might be amongst saints from ‘the poorest of the laity, from the depths of the slums’, he would never be one of them, and he could not shake the idea of sainthood as resistance. On 25 November 1941, he recorded in his journal that he had read ‘two words by Hitler in a stupid book by Rauschnig’ and that ‘Hitler believes the cupidity and selfishness of priests and of all Catholics will make it quite easy for him to destroy the Church’.⁹⁰ Merton agrees with the intuition about Catholics ‘in the purely natural order’, noting however that Hitler ‘doesn’t understand the supernatural strength which is the *only* strength of saints. And as long as Catholics rely on worldly defences against Hitler, they are lost. Therefore there is only simple defence: to take the Gospel literally, and *be saints*’.⁹¹

Two days later, on 27 November, Merton was preoccupied with the question of whether he should be going to Harlem or to the Trappists. Having not been accepted by the Franciscan Order, he was concerned about being rejected by the Trappists, and could see that working in Harlem would be a good and reasonable way to follow Christ. He would also be able to continue writing, though the fact that this mattered sickened him: a Trappist monastery would be where he could give up everything – including writing. Including the company of women, which to his own mind he had not previously managed well and which, like the writing, was troubling him.⁹² Harlem could perpetuate confusions, whereas the idea of giving up everything to join the Trappists excited him. As previously, Merton paid careful attention to the affective impulse. The desire to give up everything, to be detached from

⁹⁰ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 453.

⁹¹ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 454.

⁹² *Run to the Mountain*, p. 456. A rich commentary on this period and Merton’s relation to Friendship House in Harlem is *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, ed. and intro. by Robert A. Wild (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

possessions, ambition and a fractured economy, was not new. The previous summer, three weeks after his writing about saints in whom hope of salvation lay, Merton was staying with friends in Olean, New York, and imagining soldiers emerging from the woods to tear apart the serenity of a summer's day. The vision was dramatic, but the prospect was not absurd:

The valley is full of oil storage tanks, and oil is for feeding bombers, and once they are fed they have to bomb something, and they generally pick on oil tanks. Wherever you have oil tanks, or factories, or railroads or any of the comforts of home and manifestations of progress, in this century, you are sure to get bombers, sooner or later.⁹³

Merton knew that by being enmeshed in these socio-economic structures he was inextricably implicated in the war. Whilst he did not 'pretend, like other people, to understand the war',⁹⁴ he understood enough to come to the conclusion that 'the knowledge of what is going on only makes it seem desperately important to be voluntarily poor, to get rid of all possessions this instant'.⁹⁵ He was scared 'to own anything, even a name, let alone a coin, or shares in the oil, the munitions, the airplane factories'.⁹⁶ Indeed, he was afraid 'to take a proprietary interest in anything' in case his love of possessions 'may be killing somebody somewhere'.⁹⁷ He wanted to be as disentangled as possible from an economy of violence. If he did not number amongst the poor from whom an army of saints may arise, he could nevertheless still make choices about the extent of his participation in socio-political cycles which mete out destruction on distant lives. He could make choices which demonstrate that even under conditions of war the individual had not entirely ceased to count. This is the socio-political force of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

⁹³ Journal entry for 16 June, 1940 in *Run to the Mountain*, p. 231. Following quotes in this paragraph are from the same journal entry.

⁹⁴ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 231.

⁹⁵ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 231.

⁹⁶ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 231.

⁹⁷ *Run to the Mountain*, p. 232.

4.3.3 Separation for Engagement

If it could be argued that Merton was evading a call to arms in 1941, he did so as part of a constructive determination to engage differently with social conflict, along a religious pathway which began with active disengagement from what Merton perceived to be the sources of dehumanizing systems and trends which manifest intensely as war. His decisive course of action eventually combined monastic separation and contemplative commitment with writing whose distribution not only extended the counter-cultural witness represented by his monasticism, but at the same time actively fostered a counter-cultural discourse and, over time, networks of relationships through which that discourse might flourish.

In other words, Merton responded religiously to widespread social conflict by delinking from what he perceived to be its sources and manifestations in public life (specifically public communications), whilst continuing to engage the roots of the conflict, attentive to its manifestation not only in external affairs but also in his own heart and mind. He remained true to this decisive course of action, as he ranged across and gradually disclosed an inner landscape with public horizons. His writing traces a shifting and evolving interpretation of that course of action, including early doubts about the validity and implications of public literary expression, and its compatibility with monastic withdrawal. Amongst the several experiences which crystallized as an impulse towards separation and a life of contemplative monasticism, the economic aspect featured prominently. It is not irrelevant to our interpretation of Merton that, whilst his monastery and publishers benefitted economically from his writing, he himself did not. To have done so would have changed the nature and

effect of his witness, then and now.⁹⁸ His early quandaries about whether or not to pursue publication were at least free of this particular ethical ambiguity.

4.4 Reaffirming Faith-based Secession

Merton wrote, fifteen years after the initial publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, that ‘if anything, the decision to renounce and to depart from modern secular society, a decision repeated and reaffirmed many times, has finally become irrevocable’.⁹⁹ If ‘the attitude and the assumptions behind this decision [...] changed in many ways’, there is no change in conviction about ‘the definitive decisions [...] to be a Christian, to be a monk, to be a priest’. The primary faith-based action remained foundational; and that action, as the 1963 preface affirms, was a refusal to participate in the socio-political trends and implicit ideologies which foment and characterize ‘the hell which has burst into flame in two total wars of incredible horror, the hell of spiritual emptiness and sub-human fury which has resulted in crimes like Auschwitz and Hiroshima.’¹⁰⁰ In 1963 Merton evidently had no intention of reneging upon a commitment to live a counter-narrative in a contrary social structure, even if his mode of engagement and style of writing had developed considerably during the previous decade. He had moved into a contrary context, not departed into a vacuum: there is no actual option to ‘leave the world’. Time and again Merton described his monastic-eremitic vocation as continuous and intentional alignment with a religious narrative fundamentally at odds with beliefs, values and propaganda which legitimize warfare, social degradation and

⁹⁸ ‘It’s not just about what we do in a public protest, it’s about how we live, what we buy, how we treat money, our ecological footprint. If our lifestyles aren’t trying to move toward a greater consistency with our objectives, our chance of development grows less sustainable.’ (Ched Myers, spoken word quoted in Oyer, *Pursuing*, p. 224).

⁹⁹ ‘Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (*Nanae no yama*, 1963)’, in Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my Work* ed. by Robert E. Daggy (London: Fount, 1989), pp. 68-76 (p. 71). The next two quotes are from the same page.

¹⁰⁰ *Nanae*, p. 72.

dehumanizing of the other. Presented with an opportunity to reintroduce his pivotal autobiographical work, Merton in 1963 upheld and reaffirmed the critical separation which had always undergirded his public practice and theological thinking.

At the same time, the Japanese preface finally dismantles any crudely dualistic interpretation of movement to the monastery as ‘flight from the world’, and brings home the implicit challenge of his consistent monastic separation and non-participation. Merton asks: ‘how can one sincerely reject the effect if he continues to embrace the cause?’¹⁰¹ The question almost inevitably disrupts readers who, whilst sympathetic with Merton’s faith-based convictions, continue to participate in and benefit from the type of social-economic structures and cultural milieu he is describing broadly as ‘the cause’.

4.4.1 Critical Fidelity, Compassionate Separation

If he had learned ‘to look back into that world with greater compassion’,¹⁰² Merton nevertheless remained separated, embracing and developing his perspective as bystander to the kind of thinking which undermines compassionate solidarity, in order to live the implication of a conversion to Christ which he ‘always regarded as a radical liberation from the delusions and obsessions of modern man and his society’.¹⁰³ Merton had initially misjudged the extent of his liberation from those delusions and obsessions, but the ‘break and the secession were [nevertheless] ... matters of the greatest importance’¹⁰⁴ because ‘faith is the only real protection against the absorption of freedom and intelligence in the crass and thoughtless servitude of mass society’, and faith means living ‘the genuine

¹⁰¹ *Nanae*, p. 72. See Chapter 6 of this thesis for Merton’s late reflections on *contemptus mundi*.

¹⁰² *Nanae*, p. 72.

¹⁰³ *Nanae*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁴ *Nanae*, pp. 71-72.

eschatological consciousness of the Christian vision'.¹⁰⁵ His insistence that authentic faith rejects the false 'identification of "Christendom" with certain forms of culture and society, certain political and social structures'¹⁰⁶ undergirds his monastic resistance to 'the seduction of a totalitarian life'.¹⁰⁷ Separation was, for him, a 'rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny'¹⁰⁸ which threaten humanity and the whole earth:

By my monastic life and vows I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favour of peace. I make monastic silence a protest against the lies of politicians, propagandists and agitators, and when I speak it is to deny that my faith and my Church can ever seriously be aligned with these forces of injustice and destruction.¹⁰⁹

The 'protest and non-acquiescence' represented by monastic commitment included protest against the kind of 'arbitrary accommodation that will make the Church respected and popular', forms of Christianity which, in their vacuous optimism or preoccupation with 'temporal achievements', accommodate war, racial discrimination or tyranny.¹¹⁰

His protest extended in due course 'to certain conceptions of monasticism'¹¹¹ and a Church which had lost sight of 'a compassion for the transient world'.¹¹² Merton was continually alert, in other words, to the potentially distorting or corrupting effects of trends in the collective thinking of groups or institutions including church, academy or political movement. Continuous exposure and attention to biblical and other classical Christian

¹⁰⁵ *Nanae*, p. 75. Merton wrote in *Conjectures* (p. 51): 'Meanwhile, just at the point where eschatology in the old sense seems more credible than ever, Christians are turning to the hope of a technological golden age!'

¹⁰⁶ *Nanae*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁷ *Nanae*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁸ *Nanae*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁹ *Nanae*, pp. 74-75.

¹¹⁰ *Conjectures*, p. 195 for all quotations in this sentence.

¹¹¹ *Conjectures*, p. 47.

¹¹² *Conjectures*, p. 52. See also Merton's critique of mediaeval monasticism and Christendom at, e.g. *Conjectures*, p. 162.

literature, through habits of contemplative prayer, reading, listening, thinking and writing, heightened a vigilance to such trends not only in social discourse, but also in himself.

To his Japanese readers he re-introduced *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a story of discovering and embracing a life of Christian faith which, by definition, preserved the disciple 'from the surrender of his integrity to the seduction of a totalitarian life'.¹¹³ The author was affirming, fifteen years further down the road, his early determination to be 'a child of the tradition, one who has taken it seriously in the shaping of his or her own field of perception and system of language'.¹¹⁴ Monastic surrender involved refusal to identify with the apparent aims of so-called civil society, or with an understanding of himself developed in that context. He had voiced that determination in the earlier macaronic autobiography as desire to learn 'a concrete love which is not an abstract science but a way of life,' a love which 'only exists in actions'.¹¹⁵ The defining actions were, for Merton, faith-based secession from dehumanizing patterns, the ensuing disciplines of Trappist living and priestly vocation, and communicative writing.

4.5 War and a Crisis of Meaning: On Not Ceasing from Mental Fight

Considering again the circumstances of Merton's return to his earlier autobiography, it was during Lent of his final year when he was tidying up the manuscript of *My Argument with the Gestapo*, alongside other writing projects, including preparation of an essay on 'War and the Crisis of Meaning'. This essay was published posthumously as 'War and the Crisis of Language' in *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, edited by

¹¹³ Nanae, p. 72.

¹¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, p. 12.

¹¹⁵ *My Argument*, p. 157.

Robert Ginsberg.¹¹⁶ Whilst A. C. Ewing's review of the collection in the journal *Philosophy* misses not only the subtlety of argument but also the spelling of Merton's name, a professor of philosophy at the University of Singapore, Lee Beng Tjie, apparently thought that Merton had achieved in this essay 'the sort of thing that Wittgenstein was really getting at'.¹¹⁷ Merton himself describes the essay as consisting of the 'random and spontaneous insights' of a poet rather than of a philosopher.¹¹⁸

There is no evidence that the macaronic journal influenced Merton's writing of the late essay, but he did have both in mind around the same time, and the continuity is evident. In an influential critical study, David Cooper did not rate the 'Crisis of Language' essay as particularly noteworthy, though he considered it 'a much sharper protest against denatured contemporary prose than [Merton's] jeremiad on the degradation of symbolism'.¹¹⁹ If Cooper's assessment is correct (and I consider his evaluation of the essay in more detail in the next chapter), he nevertheless seems to miss what Merton may have been doing with the symbolism essay in giving us his clearest description of the kind of communicating to which he aspired, and how his monastic-writing vocation might extend his prolonged

¹¹⁶ The essay was republished in *Thomas Merton on Peace* ed. with intro. by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: The McCall Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 234-47. See more on this in *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 57, journal entry for 22 February 1968, which also provides some context: in this entry Merton also records a dream that President Johnson was assassinated in Louisville. Lyndon B. Johnson became President following the assassination of Kennedy in 1963 (See *Conjectures*, pp. 343-44). John's brother Robert Kennedy would be assassinated in June 1968 and, more poignantly, Martin Luther King would be assassinated six weeks after this journal entry, when Merton was at Lum's restaurant with Donald Allchin. On hearing confirmation of King's death, the men went to Hawk Rogers' restaurant in Bardstown. The Rogers were a black family (See *Other Side*, pp. 77-79). The Kennedy family retains links with the Abbey of Gethsemani.

¹¹⁷ *Other Side*, p. 324. The review by A. C. Ewing in *Philosophy* Vol.45 Issue 172 (April 1970), p. 65, has the author as 'Thomas Moreton'.

¹¹⁸ 'War and the Crisis of Language' in *Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. and intro. by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall Publishing, 1971), pp. 234-247 (p. 234).

¹¹⁹ Cooper, David D., *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 256. The term 'denatured prose' is from the Swedish Poet, Gunner Ekelöf, quoted in the essay.

engagement with the roots of dehumanization into the sphere of present-day readers. With 'War and the Crisis of Language' Merton has a different purpose, railing against the linguistic worlds of advertising, battlefields, government offices, military think-tanks, banking and church as constituting what Cooper calls 'a discourse of gross deception, evasion, euphemism' which oversimplifies 'to the point of either obscuring or trivializing' underlying concepts, or which 'successfully masks sinister connotations' by means of the 'clinical certainty' of a 'businesslike and antiseptic terminology'.¹²⁰ The political language of the United States, according to Merton, had 'lost all its value as intellectual currency',¹²¹ not least because of a more dominant currency interwoven with corrupted public discourse:

The crisis of the dollar is intimately connected with the crisis of human communication that has resulted from the sinister double-talk of the American Establishment about itself, about the war, about the race situation, about the urgent domestic problems that are being ignored or set aside while the government puts more and more money and manpower into the war.¹²²

Merton offers no analysis here but intuits a link between impoverished socio-political discourse and apparent economic crisis. The linkage between a dominant economic system and its assumed language-world was there in *My Argument*. In reality, Merton could be no more fully detached from a dominant economy than he was from the language-world in which he was formed; but, in a manner consistent with his youthful desire to relinquish participation in an economy which sustained war, he had chosen relative poverty and made no personal financial gain from his work. There are other echoes of *My Argument* in Merton's invective against an America which 'decided to rule the world without paying serious attention to anybody else's view of what the world is all about'.¹²³ It is 'in defense of

¹²⁰ These phrases are all Cooper's, from *Denial*, p. 257.

¹²¹ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 245.

¹²² 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, pp. 245-46.

¹²³ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 246.

this solipsistic, this basically isolationist and sometimes even paranoid, attitude' that language has been 'distorted and denatured'.¹²⁴ Solipsistic isolationism flourishes in a cultural 'womb of collective illusion',¹²⁵ not in the contrasting type of solitude Merton had for years been seeking and inscribing, a solitude open to the world, to each other, to God.

During his discussion with the nuns gathered at Gethsemani Abbey in May 1968, Merton compared distortions of language in America and Vietnam in 1968 with the distortion of language in Germany 'during the Nazi period'.¹²⁶ His essay on the crisis of language reaches back beyond George Steiner's highlighting the corruption of the German language by Nazism and the Second World War, to Brice Parain who studied the 'word sickness' evident in the France of 1940, 'the mortal illness of journalese and political prose that accompanied the collapse of France. In proportion as the country itself accepted the denatured prose of Vichy... it lost its identity and its capacity for valid action.'¹²⁷ As it begins, so the essay closes with reflections on the 'almost universal' sickness of political language 'characterized everywhere by the same sort of double-talk, tautology, ambiguous cliché, self-righteous and doctrinaire pomposity, and pseudoscientific jargon that mask a total callousness and moral insensitivity'.¹²⁸ Preferring the 'racy, insolent, direct, profane, iconoclastic, and earthy' new language of the likes of Lenny Bruce; 'the revolutionary tactic that tends to harass and immobilize the Goliath of technological military power' and which is 'more in contact with... the hard realities of poverty, brutality, vice and resistance',¹²⁹ Merton nonetheless resisted a wholehearted alignment with the counterforce. This strategy is typical of his dealings with

¹²⁴ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 246.

¹²⁵ Merton, 'Rain and the Rhinoceros', in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 9-23 (p. 16).

¹²⁶ *Springs*, pp. 152-53.

¹²⁷ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 234.

¹²⁸ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 246.

¹²⁹ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 247.

conflicts presented in binary terms. Turning to the revolutionary rhetoric of contemporary leaders such as Guevara and Fanon, Merton declared them to be no less than 'another language of power, therefore of self-enclosed finality, which rejects dialogue and negotiation on the axiomatic supposition that the adversary is a devil with whom no dialogue is possible'.¹³⁰ Here as elsewhere, Merton's strategy typically sustains a tension and refuses a crude dualism based on abbreviation of the other and a common logic of power which forecloses interpretation and relational communication.¹³¹ The same refusal was being fictionalized through *My Argument with the Gestapo*.

He resisted that same closure within himself, falteringly though consistently holding in tension contrasting and incommensurate ideas or worldviews, beckoning dialogue and the potential for renewed insight. Ultimately, the tension is sustained by the simple fact of his public presence/absence as a communicative monk, set apart yet strangely intimate. To the extent that readers continue to interact with Merton as though with the person represented through his literary corpus, a form of this creative and critical tension continues, and his work as communicative monk extends through the web of interactions between readers whose commitments align with Merton's own. Following Merton, we rightly resist the kind of discourse which seeks to foreclose potentially revelatory episodes and encounters.

¹³⁰ 'Crisis of Language' in Zahn, p. 247.

¹³¹ This is not to say that Merton did not clearly define and take sides on particular *issues*. Clearly he did, time and again. In 'Taking Sides on Vietnam' he writes that when he takes a side on the question of Vietnam, 'it is not the side of the United States and it is not the side of Communism. Peking, Washington, Saigon and Hanoi want the war to go on. I am on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent' (*Faith and Violence*, pp. 109-110).

4.6 More than Art, Ideas or Example: the Nature of Merton's Continuing Contribution to Transformative Faith Praxis

Merton was a monk; his monasticism took shape in response to social crisis; and that monasticism involved writing into public spaces, and to particular recipients, and into the future. He was under no illusion about the practical pointlessness of his writing (or indeed of his life as a monk) in the face of overwhelmingly destructive forces. Only a week after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and before he knew the extent to which it would impact his life and the lives of others, Merton reflected ruefully:

Sooner or later the world must burn, and all things in it – all the books, the cloister together with the brothel, Fra. Angelico together with the Lucky Strike ads.... Sooner or later it will all be consumed by fire and nobody will be left – for by that time the last man in the universe will have discovered the bomb capable of destroying the universe and will have been unable to resist the temptation to throw the thing and get it over with. And here I sit writing a diary.¹³²

Thirteen years later, a few months after the invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs, and a few days after international talks about the future of Germany gave way to construction of the Berlin Wall, Merton wrote on 18 August 1961 to his editor, James Laughlin, expressing similar if more nuanced doubts about the validity and effect of writing into a climate of war. That summer, the then-renowned author submitted 'The Root of War is Fear' for publication in the *Catholic Worker*. An edited version of this, the first of a series of articles, became a chapter in the soon-to-be-published *New Seeds of Contemplation*, bearing little resemblance to the chapter of the same name in the 1949 publication, *Seeds of Contemplation*.¹³³ Merton wrote to Laughlin:

Personally I am more and more concerned about the question of peace and war. I am appalled by the way everyone simply sits around and acts as though everything were

¹³² Journal entry for Sunday 10 October, 1948 in *Jonas*, p. 126.

¹³³ The original chapter is in *Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949), pp. 70-73. The new chapter is in *(New) Seeds of Contemplation* (Wheathampstead, Herts: Anthony Clarke, 1971), pp. 86-94.

normal. It seems to me that I have an enormous responsibility myself, since I am read by a lot of people, and yet I don't know what to begin to say and then I am as though bound and gagged by the censors, who though not maliciously reactionary are just obtuse and slow. This feeling of frustration is terrible. Yet what can one say? ¹³⁴

The matter of Merton's relationship with censors is not straightforward. His baptism as a Catholic Christian and his monastic vows signify a willing restraint and submission on which his identity, influence and, to some extent, his freedom were founded. Without the kind of self-limiting reinforced by censorship, Merton would not carry the representative authority and influence which follow the *imprimi potest* of the Abbot General and the *imprimatur* of a bishop. When frustrated about censorship, the issue is not simply restraint (for he has freely chosen to be restrained), but the stance and the public voice of the Church or of the Order which he loved and represented. Jim Forest recalls that the Roman Catholic Church in America in the early 1960s 'could be relied on to have a supportive attitude regarding America's economic system and foreign policy. Over many a Catholic parish or school entrance were carved the words, *Pro Deo et Patria* – for God and country'.¹³⁵ Merton was frequently rocking that particular boat. Eight months after the aforementioned letter to Laughlin, he completed a manuscript which was denied the *imprimi potest* of the Abbot General, Dom Gabriel Sortais. *Peace in the Post Christian Era* was not published until 2004, more than forty years later.¹³⁶ In 1962 Merton was reacting strongly to what he interpreted as being silenced on matters of war and peace. 'The command of the Abbot General (it is

¹³⁴ Merton and Laughlin, p. 177.

¹³⁵ Jim Forest, 'Foreword' in Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* ed. by Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), pp. vii-xxiv (p. viii).

¹³⁶ In a footnote to the same Foreword, Jim Forest writes: 'A book that Merton was editing at the time, *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination*, did make it into print, but when it went to press, Merton could not be identified by New Directions as the book's editor. Nonetheless, his introduction was published under his name and the book also contained one of his essays, "Peace: A Religious Responsibility," a text similar to the first chapter of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (*Post-Christian*, p. xxiii, note 2).

not yet a completely formal command, but this is his wish, though it is actually formulated rather by his secretary who is in charge of these things) is that I write only things which are “fitting” in a monk’.¹³⁷ An order which to his mind demonstrated ‘an astounding incomprehension of the seriousness of the present crisis in its religious aspect. It reflects an insensitivity to Christian and Ecclesiastical values, and to the real sense of the monastic vocation.’¹³⁸ Before this episode drew his fire on matters of ecclesial obedience and the official voice of the Church in society, Merton was questioning the effectiveness of his writing at all on war:

If I go around shouting ‘abolish war’ it will be meaningless. Yet at least some one has to say that. I am in no position to plan a book about it. There is no purpose to a silly book of editorial-like platitudes. Some more poems like Auschwitz, maybe. But the thing is to be *heard*. And everything is perfectly soundproof and thought proof. We are all doped right up to the eyes. And words have become useless, no matter how true they may be.¹³⁹

Somewhat emotionally, Merton was evaluating the likely reception of particular types of writing within a social context more enclosed (from his perspective) than a walled monastery. Publishing may have seemed of little practical purpose in the face of war, but Merton persisted in reaching out to establish and nurture relationships with readers, seeking to communicate in a manner consistent with his ongoing monastic vocation; that is, in ways which might contribute to cracking open ‘soundproof and thought-proof’ mass thinking. Persuasive argument or exchange of information might be effective under certain conditions, where interlocutors share common understanding of the context of interchange;

¹³⁷ Letter to James Laughlin, 28 April 1962, in *Merton and Laughlin*, pp. 201-203 (p. 202).

¹³⁸ Letter to James Forest, 29 April 1962, in *Cold War Letters*, ed. and intro. by Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), pp. 132-34 (pp. 132-33).

¹³⁹ Letter to Laughlin, 18 August 1961, in *Merton and Laughlin*, pp. 176-78 (p. 177). Merton may be referring to ‘Auschwitz: A Family Camp’, published in *Catholic Worker* in November 1967, and *Thomas Merton on Peace* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1976), pp. 72-81, but the mention of a poem suggests this is a reference to ‘Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces’ in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 43-47 (also published in *Catholic Worker* in July 1961).

but both are of severely limited worth amidst the crisis of communication and imagination which Merton saw as intrinsic to a climate of war: 'We are all wound up in lies and illusions and as soon as we begin to think or talk the machinery of falsity operates automatically. The worst of all is not to know this, and apparently a lot of people don't'.¹⁴⁰ With minimal confidence in established rational discourse, Merton turned to the kind of writing which reflects and provokes, in hope that he might enable 'a rare person here and there to come alive and be awake at a moment when wakefulness is desirable – a moment of ultimate choice, in which he finds himself challenged in the roots of his own existence'.¹⁴¹

4.6.1 Writing for Awakening and Communing

'Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily-armed robbers, or is it an awakening?' asked Merton in 1967.¹⁴² Previously he had used the language of dreaming to refer to social illusions or mesmerism. For example, in a letter of December 1961 he had written of a basic need 'for truth, and not the "images" and slogans that "engineer consent." We are living in a dream world. We do not know ourselves or our adversaries. We are myths to ourselves and they are myths to us'.¹⁴³ The theme recurs in the prologue (dated 'Fall, 1965') to *Raids on the Unspeakable*, which Merton describes as comprising 'difficult insights at a moment of human crisis', insights which although ill-defined, 'obscure and ironic' may nevertheless prompt awakening.¹⁴⁴ This is communicative writing intending specific action in the world. The short, stylized prologue declares *Raids* to be active response to 'the critical challenge of

¹⁴⁰ to Laughlin, 18 August 1961 in *Merton and Laughlin*, p. 177.

¹⁴¹ *Raids*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴² Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. x.

¹⁴³ To Ethel Kennedy, December 1961 in *Cold War Letters*, pp. 26-29 (p.29).

¹⁴⁴ *Raids*, p. 2. Ross Labrie ('Thomas Merton on the Unspeakable', in *The Merton Seasonal* 36.4 (2011), pp. 3-12) notes that Merton's title evokes T. S. Eliot's 'raids on the inarticulate' mourning 'the debasement and unreliability of language – its unspeakableness – especially in the public sphere' (p.3).

the hour' – namely, dehumanization – 'with poetry and irony rather than tragic declamation or confessional formulas'.¹⁴⁵ He intended neither practical solution nor ethical analysis, only a poetic articulation of eschatological challenge to the habitual ideas which generate and sustain inhuman behaviour. On 18 July 1965, Merton wrote in his journal that his job, and that of the Church, is 'to awaken in myself and in others the sense of real possibility, of truth, of obedience to Him who is Holy, of refusal of pretenses and servitudes – without arrogance and hubris and specious idealism.'¹⁴⁶ The work of awakening is frustrated by an overwhelming and distorting barrage of communication bearing a Christian veneer in 'our society that pretends to be Christian [but] is in fact rejecting the word of God, enabled to do so by the all-pervading suffocating noise of its own propaganda [...]. This is a deluding, fanatical, stupid society'.¹⁴⁷ A week earlier, Merton replied to a correspondent on 10 July 1965, referring to himself as 'an existentialist Christian' and saying:

I have often experienced the fact that the 'moment of truth' in the Christian context is the encounter with the inscrutable word of God, the personal and living interpretation of the word of God when it is lived, when it breaks through by surprise into our own completely contemporary and personal existence. And this means of course that it breaks through conventional religious routines and even seems in some ways quite scandalous in terms of the average and accepted interpretation of what religion ought to be.¹⁴⁸

It was in order to be less suffocated by an all-pervading social discourse that Merton had entered monastic life, where a rigorously-disciplined and biblically-infused ethos permitted and fostered a deep-rooted refiguration. Even as he outgrew early narrations of that

¹⁴⁵ *Raids*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 272.

¹⁴⁷ *Dancing*, p. 272. This is a central theme of 'Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant' published the previous year in *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Mohandas K. Gandhi's 'Non-Violence in Peace and War'*, ed. and intro. by Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 1-20. That essay also focuses on the work of communicating in a manner directly resistant to a corrupting society. For an assessment of Merton's reading of Gandhi, see Israel Selvanayagam, 'Gandhi on Nonviolence: Does Merton's Appreciation Appeal Today?' in *The Merton Journal* 14.1, pp. 2-14.

¹⁴⁸ letter to Mr. Wainwright, in *Witness to Freedom*, pp. 253-54 (p. 254).

movement, the actual intentional separation remained Merton's central communicative action, his signposting alterity and a commitment to conditions under which wakefulness might be more likely. By 1965, his move to a hermitage was underway, representing another degree of separation, in this case from the society of monks which, according to Merton, perpetuated its own illusions. He hoped that the hermitage would permit what he describes as 'confrontation with the word, and with God, and with the only possibilities that are fully real, or with those that are most real.'¹⁴⁹ Once again, the work of awakening involved intentional separation, this time from the monastic environs where 'reality is smothered'.¹⁵⁰

In the prologue to the book that he hoped would contribute to awakening those who are ready, he confronted those people 'at present so eager to be reconciled with the world at any price', warning that they 'take care not to be reconciled with it under this particular aspect: *as the nest of the Unspeakable*.'¹⁵¹ The Unspeakable represents 'a theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God'.¹⁵² The Unspeakable co-habits with the 'incontestable and definitive' goodness of the world, represented by Atlas in another of the essays carried over to *Raids* from the *Titans* collection. In 'Atlas and the Fatman', it is the Fatman who represents all who submit to and

¹⁴⁹ Journal entry for 18 July 1965, in *Dancing*, p. 272. Douglas Steere recorded in his 'Notes on Conference with Thomas Merton, February 1962' that in response to comments about nuclear deterrence, 'Thomas Merton said that he saw little hope from the ordinary methods of waking people up to the present danger. It may have to come by a terrible accident, by something almost apocalyptic' (Thomas Merton and Douglas V. Steere, 'Notes after First Visit and Correspondence 1962-1968' in *The Merton Annual* 6, pp. 23-53 (p. 26)).

¹⁵⁰ *Dancing*, p. 272.

¹⁵¹ *Raids*, p. 5 (Merton's italics).

¹⁵² *Raids*, pp. 4-5.

collude with 'the Unspeakable.'¹⁵³ In another of the book's essays, Eugène Ionesco's 'Rhinoceros' image functions in similar fashion to the 'Fat Man'.¹⁵⁴ These various symbols mark Merton's return to a theme which runs through *My Argument*, an emphasis on 'the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss' (*Raids*, p. 5). So we read Merton's separation as distancing from the gravitational pull of a 'collective mind', in a silence which counters the persistence of corrupted and corrupting language, in order to recover a connectedness which undergirds more authentic communication. To collude with or simply to underestimate 'the Unspeakable' is to participate in its machinations. One way in which Merton contributes to the work of awakening is by provoking awareness of and attention to what 'too few are willing to see'.¹⁵⁵

Merton closes his 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', another essay carried over to *Raids* from *The Behavior of Titans*, with reference to a story commonly called 'The Emperor's New Clothes', with the child who 'dared to point out that the king was naked'.¹⁵⁶ He spells out his point: the vocation of the innocent bystander (indeed, the condition of the kind of innocence he is describing) is to persist in declaring the king naked, even at the cost of being condemned as criminal. Such a vocation not only replicates the innocence of the bystander child, but also channels soteriological effect:

Remember, the child in the tale was the only one innocent: and because of his innocence, the fault of the others was kept from being criminal, and was nothing worse than foolishness. If the child had not been there, they would all have been madmen, or criminals. It was the child's cry that saved them.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ 'Atlas and the Fat Man' in *Raids*, pp. 91-107.

¹⁵⁴ 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' in *Raids*, pp. 9-23. The essay picks up Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinocéros: Pièce en Trois Actes et Quatre Tableaux* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1959).

¹⁵⁵ *Raids*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁶ *Raids*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁷ *Raids*, p. 62.

As conclusion to the essay, the illustration is poignant; but this is an essay about the social role, obligation or potential of ‘the intellectual’ in critical times, and in this regard the illustration seems inadequate. In the traditional tale, the king’s nakedness and the deception of the tailors are presented as verifiably objective facts named openly by the child who thus reveals the collusion of the herd in the king’s wilful self-deception. Members of the herd, the mass-mind, then stop pretending to see what even the king had persuaded himself to pretend to see. How this translates into the work of the intellectual social critic is unclear, though the implication is that all, including the powerful purveyors of deception, may be awakened to admitting what is in plain sight. The very condition of innocence is ‘to do what the child did, and keep on saying that the king is naked, at the cost of being condemned criminals’.¹⁵⁸ Merton is addressing first and foremost those whose work is to publish into the public domain, ‘the intellectuals who have taken for granted that we could be “bystanders” and that our quality as detached observers could preserve our innocence and relieve us of responsibility.’¹⁵⁹ These are the very actors who have a vital role to play in the struggle between destructive power-seekers and everyone else. Addressing himself as much as any other, Merton is telling us something of the nature of his publishing as extension of the singular monastic vocation.¹⁶⁰

In *Raids*, the poignancy of the ‘Letter to an Innocent Bystander’ is amplified by its being positioned after the coolly devastating ‘A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf

¹⁵⁸ *Raids*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁵⁹ *Raids*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁰ *Raids*, p. 53. Victor Kramer writes that ‘Letter to an Innocent Bystander’ ‘(to some degree) mutated into the concept for the book that became *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Part of what is revealed in the earlier essay, written as a letter, and in the revised journal entries for the book, is an assurance that we are neither innocent nor guilty; we are all living in an ambivalent situation’ (Kramer, ‘“Crisis and Mystery”: The Changing Quality of Thomas Merton’s Later Journals’, in Patrick F. O’Connell, ed., *The Vision of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), pp. 77-97 (p. 91).

Eichmann'.¹⁶¹ The notion of an 'innocent bystander' was now being discussed in the wake of heightened public attention to Nazi atrocities following the trial of Eichmann, the disturbingly 'ethical man'; a trial which began on 11 April 1961 and concluded on 12 December that year, with Eichmann's execution taking place on 15 December 1961. The effect of the recording and broadcasting of this trial was immense.¹⁶² People witnessed a face of the 'banality of evil', the surprising ordinariness and apparent sanity of a man claiming to be not guilty, because he had not been 'a responsible leader' but a 'mere instrument in the hands of the leaders'.¹⁶³

The original setting of Merton's 'Letter', published before the Eichmann trial, established different resonances. In *Behavior of Titans* it was set alongside 'A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State' (which had appeared in *The Carleton Miscellany* in 1960), the two essays together constituting a section called 'The Guilty Bystander'. In this original setting, Merton's reference to the 'cost of being condemned criminals' leads into the 'confession', which is then received as a type of the 'child's cry', exposing with irony and absurdity the pretences and delusions of mass thinking. Merton calls attention to a natural order whose ways become lost when unheeded, or when masked by a prevalent statist ideology of economic valuation and efficiency.

¹⁶¹ *Raids*, pp. 45-49.

¹⁶² 'Difficult as it might be for us to imagine today, in 1961 the world had still not faced up to the sheer scale of the Holocaust. Obviously, since the original newsreel footage of the death camps had played in cinemas in 1945, everyone was perfectly aware of what had happened. There was a sense, though, even in some communities in Israel, that people wanted to shut it out.'
<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/11351945/The-man-who-shot-Adolf-Eichmann.html>> [accessed 21/08/17].

¹⁶³ These words are from his pardon plea released in 2016. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published in 1963. Merton references Arendt at *Conjectures*, p. 93.

The brief, ironic declaration is a spirited defence of solitude, of contemplative attention to life in the woods, and of writing as an act of recording and recollection. Merton confesses to such crimes as sitting under a pine tree, listening to a mockingbird, watching clouds go by and of intentionally 'doing absolutely nothing'.¹⁶⁴ He confesses on behalf of the birds singing, and of the sun shining. He confesses his very existence: 'Clearly I am not worthy to exist another minute. And yet I go on shamelessly. I continue to exist.'¹⁶⁵ His existence is 'an admission of guilt' and the thoughts (which he equates with writing) are 'crimes against the state'.¹⁶⁶ To think is to be guilty, and to write is to declare oneself guilty, whether or not what is written is true: 'Everything that is written, anywhere, or by anybody, is a potential confession of crimes against the state.'¹⁶⁷

It may be incongruous to attempt analysis of a piece of writing which is essentially celebration and *witness* to existence independent of state intervention. 'I am simply writing down what I have actually done, or rather what I have not done', says Merton.¹⁶⁸ The supposed crime is to be attentive and unproductive. At the heart of this piece, a form of performance poetry, is an assertion of a liberty which is essentially personalist, even anarchist: 'I just *don't do* the things that they do on one side or the other [...]. I am neither a partisan nor a traitor. The worst traitor is the one who simply takes no interest. That's me.'¹⁶⁹ At face value this assertion appears to contradict the argument in 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', about recognizing inevitable dependence upon some other, which precedes intentional alignment with the non-coercive rather than the manipulative or

¹⁶⁴ 'A Signed Confession of Crimes Against the State' in *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 65-71 (p. 68).

¹⁶⁵ 'A Signed Confession' in *Titans*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁶⁶ 'A Signed Confession' in *Titans*, p. 65.

¹⁶⁷ 'A Signed Confession' in *Titans*, p. 67.

¹⁶⁸ 'A Signed Confession' in *Titans*, p. 69.

¹⁶⁹ 'A Signed Confession' in *Titans*, p. 61.

persuasive other. But this 'confession' reinforces rather than contradicts the preceding argument if Merton's refusal of the duality (partisan or traitor) is itself understood as rejection of a dominant form of discourse which insists on over-riding oppositional dialectics. The life he describes in 'A Signed Confession' is to some extent the life he continued to perform in the imagination of readers. It communicates in ways other than the 'civil exchange of ideas [...] between two persons'¹⁷⁰ intended with the 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander'. The letter itself is clearly not an exchange between two persons, but a statement released into the public realm, designed to find those empathetic readers with whom a more personal exchange might be imagined, based on a shared critical perspective.

Merton's extensive correspondence reveals the degree to which he valued interpersonal exchange, as do accounts and recordings of his conferences and classes. His hope, that a 'civil exchange of ideas' might occur between people, is not restricted to interaction with himself, however, and in this regard his more formal published works also have a part to play in fostering civil exchange of ideas between readers and others, which may flourish into more full-bodied collaboration across a web of interactions which do not require Merton's active presence any more than they did during his lifetime - as long as 'we have not yet reached the stage where we are all hermetically sealed, each one in the collective arrogance and despair of his own herd'.¹⁷¹ Resisting the temptation to formulate programme or plan, Merton assents only to wait in hope, actively refusing the displacement of God by the false god of 'blind, cruel and petty' human autonomy: 'We can call ourselves innocent only if we refuse to forget this, and if we also do everything we can to make others realize it.'¹⁷² Doing

¹⁷⁰ *Raids*, p. 53.

¹⁷¹ *Raids*, p. 53.

¹⁷² *Raids*, p. 61.

everything to make others realize it included, for Merton, publishing from a context of determined availability to a contrary interruption, by a Word which is more than words, and which may arrive like 'a flood which breaks the dam'.¹⁷³ Elsewhere, Merton sees people 'estranged from that with which they are always in contact' and from one another, for 'the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own' whilst the 'waking have one common world'.¹⁷⁴ They are alert to their interconnectedness.

The author of *Raids* hoped that readers might be awakened by his efforts, as is stated even more baldly in a journal entry of 18 July 1965.¹⁷⁵ The emphasis is different at the opening of 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', published in September of that year in *New Blackfriars*. There, the valley birds are, by contrast, awakened by 'the Father'.¹⁷⁶ As Merton in private jottings from the period expressed a longing for the Church to awaken from the 'all-pervading suffocating noise of its own propaganda,' so the poetic prose of 'The Night Spirit' contrasts a noisy, controlling human awakening to the clock with 'the first chirps of the waking [day] birds' whose eyes are opened by the Father, to whom they then begin to speak 'not with fluent song, but with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the "point vierge"',¹⁷⁷ the 'virgin point between darkness and light, between nonbeing and being'.¹⁷⁸ Meanwhile, the human awakened to technological noise, 'fallen into self-mastery' and therefore unable to 'ask permission of anyone'¹⁷⁹ misses the

¹⁷³ Journal entry for 27 November 1966, in *Learning to Love*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁴ Merton, 'The Legacy of Herakleitos', in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 767-775 (p. 768).

¹⁷⁵ 'Yet my job and that of the Church remains this: to awaken in myself and in others the sense of real possibility, of truth, of obedience to Him who is Holy, of refusal of pretenses and servitudes – without arrogance and hubris and specious idealism' (*Dancing*, p. 272).

¹⁷⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 128.

¹⁷⁷ *Conjectures*, p. 128.

¹⁷⁸ *Conjectures*, p. 129.

¹⁷⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 128.

‘unspeakable secret’ that ‘paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open’.¹⁸⁰

In Chapter Six I will refer in more detail to this section of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Here, the point to note is that, whilst contrasting in emphasis and style, these are not incompatible ideas, if the ‘ultimate choice’ Merton brings before readers is that between an imagined self-mastery on the one hand and, on the other, responsiveness to being awakened by God the Father. Merton’s writing is a creative extension of his inhabiting a world constructed around a biblical counter-narrative, inviting the reader into exposure to the potential confrontation recognizable, in terms of that counter-narrative, as encounter with inbreaking divinity. It is the Father who awakens creatures into paradise.

James Finley recalled how ‘In a conference Merton gave to the novices, he quoted Meister Eckhart as saying that “for God to be is to give being. For us to be is to receive being.”’¹⁸¹ Merton’s intention to awaken readers is his contribution to this kind of reception of being. Further into the same section of *Conjectures*, he writes that ‘One thing above all is important: the “return to the Father”’.¹⁸² Notwithstanding Merton’s tendency to declare one thing or another of ultimate importance, the passage resonates with the opening paragraphs of this section, in that a willed return to the Father assumes awakened response to the Father. That return is ‘the whole meaning and heart of all existence’ in which all things ‘take on their right significance’.¹⁸³ It is not a reversal, but a pressing forward to the End in which we find ‘our Beginning, the ever-new Beginning that has no end’.¹⁸⁴ It is, in

¹⁸⁰ *Conjectures*, p. 129.

¹⁸¹ *Already One*, p. 155.

¹⁸² *Conjectures*, p. 168.

¹⁸³ *Conjectures*, p. 168.

¹⁸⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 169.

other words, an awakening to properly eschatological perspective. Merton is simply affirming a classical motif on the back of his dismantling of ambiguities about 'being good' and 'doing good' embedded in certain forms of deontological, existential or virtue-oriented ethics. 'For conversion to Christ is not merely the conversion from bad habits to good habits, but *nova creatura*, becoming a totally new man in Christ and in the Spirit.'¹⁸⁵

Ideas about good or bad habits are overwritten by a language of love which is 'the witness and evidence of "new being" in Christ' and is itself 'the work of Christ' revealed through 'one who realizes his own poverty and nothingness'.¹⁸⁶ Whether or not we conclude that Merton's writing and publishing are, even occasionally, such 'witness and evidence', we can deduce that he intended not only to describe but also to communicate the kind of love through which the reader might respond in the manner described variously (yet in thoroughly orthodox Christian terms) as awakening or returning to the Father.

There were other effects Merton sought to achieve through writing, such as fostering and extending a sense of communion with readers who at least to some extent 'share in common sufferings and desires and needs that are urgent'.¹⁸⁷ Whether or not we receive the writing in this kind of sympathetic manner determines the dynamic established between reader and text, or reader and imagined author. Merton's continuing contribution to theological discourse and faith praxis is determined at least in part by a reader's sense of urgent and shared sufferings, needs and desires, and a recognition of his monastic living and writing as responsive to the same. Readers convinced of the counter-cultural heart of Christian praxis, and of Merton's integrity in seeking to inhabit and perform that counter-

¹⁸⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 166.

¹⁸⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 167.

¹⁸⁷ From a letter to 'Lorraine', 17 April 17, 1964' in *Witness*, p. 167. He contrasts this intention with writing for readers who base judgements on a good blurb or review.

cultural narrative, encounter a detailed testimony of one who would not ultimately be reconciled with habits, views or conditions incompatible with a sustained focus on the effort to be faithfully responsive to God and to fellow creatures in a time of socio-political crisis. His monastic living and writing are inseparable in our experience of him, together constituting a public witness wherein publications are weighted by the gravitational force of the monastic commitment they express. With his unexpected emergence into the limelight of Cold War America, Merton implicitly confronted readers with the fact of monastic secession as an outcome and expression of conversion to Christian faith. Those who are intrigued rather than bemused, who meet Merton with similar existential questions about how to live faithfully in times of crisis, who recognize the logic of his separating and the force of its communicative witness, encounter a curiously relational body of work in which writings on, say, contemplation or monastic traditions derive a peculiar force from the socio-political context into which they were initially published.

By the same token, Merton's critical readings of cultural, political or ecclesial trends and conflicts continue to have force to the extent that they arise from his faithful (if sometimes belligerent) submission to monastic discipline and his persistent, contemplative struggle to inhabit and express prophetic biblical traditions. Writings on, say, the discovery of the real self are intimately related to writings about civil rights or consumerism or the Vietnam War, a point resonant with Joan Chittister's observation that unless we 'work with the basic instincts and urgings, soul shifts and values, desires and hopes within us to become the

fullness of the raw material of the self' then 'we doom ourselves to buy into the empty images every new world creates to define itself'.¹⁸⁸

4.7 Concluding Remarks: Recovering a Perspective, Not Over-Writing Complexity

In this chapter I have traced strands in Merton's pivotal autobiography, his relatively neglected 'macaronic journal,' and personal journals which illustrate ways in which he was interpreting monastic vocation as a constructive faith response to violent social crisis. Fifteen years after its initial publication, he reaffirmed the social secession and monastic immersion to which *The Seven Storey Mountain* bore witness. During the last year of his life he was determined to get the macaronic journal into the public domain, a fact which suggests that the author considered it a significant element of his enduring monastic witness. Aspects of *My Argument with the Gestapo* and early personal journals illuminate the socio-cultural meaning of Merton's dramatized shift from one social location to another, which became a notably public reality when representations of the counter-immersion were published back into the milieu from which he had chosen to be estranged. The shape of that public monastic-writing vocation continually evolved, but the fact of it was a constant. We know Merton as a writer-monk, from beginning to end. We also know him as one who sought to cultivate forms of relationship (with and amongst readers) resonant with the counter-cultural vision his monastic living signalled. His extensive correspondence is indicative of the seriousness of Merton's commitment to interpersonal relationality; alongside which the body of published literature became increasingly responsive to

¹⁸⁸ Joan Chittister, OSB, 'What We Have To Be Is What We Are: Merton's Unfinished Agenda' in Gray Henry, Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 54-55 (p. 54).

relational approaches, not least with the publication (which Merton anticipated) of peculiarly personal, multi-layered and seemingly disclosive journals and letters. The fact of Merton's continuous and determined monastic separation tempers any sense of intimacy with the reminder of an unbridgeable distance. The dialectic between distance and intimacy characterizes Merton's way of holding readers in a place of tension between social crisis and eschatological hope.

This is a general point about the overall effect of the Merton corpus; which, in the next chapter, I will attempt to show is consistent with things Merton was saying late in his life about preferred modes of communication. My general point is no comment on the many and varied motivations, circumstances or intentions behind any given piece of writing. For example, one large portion, published posthumously, was produced primarily for the formational teaching work which occupied much of Merton's monastic life.¹⁸⁹ These writings in themselves, like some of Merton's more didactic publications on monastic traditions, are (I suggest) unlikely to foster the kind of relational dialectic I am describing. However, when they are read in relation to audio recordings of classes Merton led, the contrast between Merton's prepared notes and his engagement with brother monks gives another insight into his relational manner. The recordings also remind us of some of the ways in which face to face interaction will always differ from what is achievable through text alone. Further, these teaching notes are best understood in relation to their original purpose in the formation of Trappist monks; that is, of people who had already made a vocational shift from one form of social organization to another. The context of their original

¹⁸⁹ Readers now have, courtesy of Patrick F. O'Connell, ready access to thousands of pages of published teaching material on monastic and mystical traditions, an outstanding collection which demonstrates the depth of Merton's rootedness in classical sources.

production, usage and reception contributes to their meaning, and forgetfulness of that context can leave some of the writings seeming dry or outmoded. As insight into the author's formation, perspective, character and community, they can once again become fascinating, giving us clear indication of what Merton considered to be important in the formation of members of that particular counter-cultural community at that time.

In practice, fragments of Merton will continue to be (for devotional, academic, ideological or any number of reasons) cut adrift from their provenance and adapted to a worldview, meaning-scheme or attitude which they no longer modify or disrupt in the way that attention to his primary communicative action (his becoming a monk-writer) does.¹⁹⁰ Theological readings of Merton which do not take adequate account of that defining communicative action, and the circumstances which make it intelligible, are prone to being distorted or frustrated.

¹⁹⁰ I describe this as his primary communicative action from the perspective of present-day readers (who know Merton only because he wrote, and know him only as a monk). This is not a comment on, say, the process through which Merton arrived at the monastery.

CHAPTER 5: MERTON'S CONTINUING COMMUNICATION

It is for us to understand St. Bernard's sanctity not merely by studying his history,
but by perceiving something of its life-giving effect.

Thomas Merton, *The Last of the Fathers*, 1954.¹

¹ Merton, *The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical Letter Doctor Mellifluus* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1954), p. 27.

To conclude that the historical Merton was 'prophetic' is one thing; to describe how he continues to be prophetic is another matter. To that end I have been attempting to find a way into thinking about Merton's contribution to present-day theological discourse and faith practice, first by taking note of characteristic trends in the reception of Merton, then by considering those trends in relation to what Merton tells us, directly or implicitly, about his reasons for writing and publishing. I have highlighted the fact that his acts of writing and publishing were monastic practices (inasmuch as there is no 'outside' of his monastic vocation), and made a case for reading his movement to the monastery, then his ongoing monastic living, as a sustained, constructive response to dehumanizing trends which manifest dramatically as violent conflict. He was continually mindful of the socio-political circumstances into which his counter-cultural living was being communicated, and in relation to which he was being interpreted.

The literature that we now have was originally produced as expression and extension of Merton's primary communicative action, a Christian monastic commitment which emerged from the concurrence of critical social conditions (both global and local), the author's heightened affective resonance, and engagement with broadly theological literature and Catholic aesthetics. The intentions or hopes which motivated the author to produce particular writings are sometimes made explicit (effects such as awakening, or nurturing relationships consistent with the web of interdependence he sometimes described as communion), or are sometimes deducible. We can, for instance, reasonably infer that Merton's expressions of admiration for the work of a Saint Bernard, Clement or Simone Weil are indicative of that to which he himself aspires.

By a similarly inferential process I am in this chapter looking for what Merton may tell us about how he hoped to go on communicating with readers beyond his death, and how that communicating might contribute to a perpetuation of Christian witness consistent with his own. To that end, I am focusing on an essay which, unusually for Merton, deals directly with the theme of communication. It was produced during 1965, when thoughts about his legacy were evidently on Merton's mind.² By then, a large proportion of the legacy to which readers now have access had been produced - though much of it would be generally unknown for another twenty years and more.

It is with some hesitation that I attempt to derive from a particular piece of Merton's work any generalizable sense of what he hoped to achieve by communicating through writing. His thoughts and perspectives were continually shifting, to the extent that he could sometimes flatly contradict something he had stated previously.³ Nevertheless, in the late essay 'Symbolism: Communication or Communion?' Merton gives us a rare, sustained reflection on contrasting forms of communication which might inform and guide our reception of Merton texts. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the essay in question

² The Merton Room had been opened in November 1963 at Bellarmine College. In 1965 Merton was sorting material whilst clearing his office as he retired from duties as Novice Master and prepared to move to the hermitage. His fiftieth birthday in January of that year had been a period of sober reflection (see the journal entries for 30 and 31 January 1965 in *Dancing*, pp. 196-201). Edward K. Kaplan concludes an essay by saying that the 'fiftieth birthday journal highlights the conscious and subconscious work that helped prepare him to face the world with faith, self-confidence, and a passionate devotion to truth. Readers remain grateful to Merton, to his editors, and to the legal guardians of his legacy, for having created the conditions of disclosure and self-examination that make true dialogue possible' ('Seeds of Sorrow: Thomas Merton's Fiftieth Birthday Journal' in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12.2 (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp. 278-287. In March 1967, Merton would be making arrangements with John Slate for access to his 'raw' materials.

³ In a journal entry for 25 January 1964, Merton wrote: 'I am aware of the need for constant self-revision and growth, leaving behind the renunciations of yesterday and yet in continuity with all my yesterdays. [...] My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, and I am always seeing that center from somewhere else. Hence, I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation' (*A Vow of Conversation*, ed. with an intro by Naomi Burton Stone (Basingstoke, Hants: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1988), p. 19).

was dismissed by David Cooper as too much of a 'jeremiad'; but Cooper did not pursue the possibility that Merton may be telling us indirectly about ways in which our reading him might extend and reanimate his historical witness. In this essay Merton makes clear that there are ways of communicating which are more consistent than others with his vocation and intention, and contrary to dominant forms of (pseudo-)communication associated with the violent and dehumanizing trends he sought to expose and contest.

5.1 A Guiding Essay on Contrasting Modes of Communication

5.1.1 Circumstances of the Production of the Essay

'Symbolism: Communication or Communion?' was written in the early summer of 1965.

Merton was fifty years old. He resigned as Novice Master and, on 17 August 1965, a private council voted favourably on Merton's 'retirement to the hermitage' in the grounds of Gethsemani Abbey.⁴ The desire for solitude was longstanding: Merton had received 'permission to use the forest lookout tower as his hermitage' around the time he began as Novice Master in 1955.⁵ On 16 December 1964 he was celebrating permission to stay full days in the hermitage, and on the Feast of St. Bernard, 20 August 1965, Merton recorded in his journal:

I go down to chapter for the last time (normally).... Dom James will announce the change of novice masters... and will make some remarks supposedly jocular and in some way

⁴ *Dancing*, p. 281. John Howard Griffin (*Follow the Ecstasy*, p. 45) mistakenly records this as happening on 18 August, which was the day he recorded events in his journal.

⁵ Shannon (in *Silent Lamp*, p. 146) writes that in September 1955 'Merton receives permission to use the forest lookout tower as his hermitage. When Dom Walter Helmstetter, the novice master, is elected as abbot of the Abbey of the Genesee, Merton asked to be appointed to the position of novice master. He is appointed.' Shannon records that on 27 April of that year 'Merton confides to Dom Jean Leclercq that he has reached a point where he cannot and should not remain at Gethsemani. His superiors are not interested in his hermit calling' (p. 146). In October, following the appointment as Novice Master, 'Merton writes to Dom Gabriel Sortais that he is now convinced that he should remain at Gethsemani' (p. 146). A thorough study of Merton's unsettledness throughout this period is Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

political, to explain why a nut like me is allowed to live alone in the woods – but explain it in such a way that too many others will *not* be encouraged to follow suit.⁶

Days later, on the Feast of St. Louis, he commented that the ‘five days I have had in real solitude have been a revelation, and whatever questions I may have had about it are answered’.⁷ Merton remained faithful in his pursuit of marginality, as he made plain in his last ever formal talk. If interpreters describe him as becoming more ‘open to the world’,⁸ there is no sense in which Merton is reneging on his commitment to a separated witness. Indeed, by moving away from the regular life of his monastic community, he became further separated from business-like industriousness and what he experienced as the distortions, distractions and toxicity of a dominant ethos he was increasingly unable to stomach.

During the week before the 1965 Feast of St. Bernard, anticipating his change of role and move to the hermitage, Merton seemed sometimes overwhelmed by ‘the insane accumulation of books, notes, manuscripts, letters, papers’ whilst ‘trying to clean out [the] novice master’s office, sort out what to keep and what to throw away, etc.’.⁹ He wrote of the need to ‘develop a silence of printed words, of words possessed and accumulated (mere shit)’¹⁰ Merton was taking stock, and could hardly avoid thinking about how he would be received by future readers. He noted his propensity to accumulate printed words, not least

⁶ *Dancing*, p. 282.

⁷ *Dancing*, p. 283 (journal entry for 25 August). The feast day was of particular significance for Merton, whose religious names was Fr M. Louis.

⁸ This theme will be addressed in the next chapter.

⁹ *Dancing*, p. 280 (journal entry for 14 August).

¹⁰ *Dancing*, p. 280. There are resonances here of the legendary vision of Aquinas on 6 December 1273, after which he considered all he had written to be ‘straw’ or ‘chaff’. Aquinas stopped writing; Merton did not such thing. Indirectly illustrating the contrast, Kenneth Leech quoted a study by Josef Pieper: ‘The last word of St Thomas is not communication but silence. And it is not death which takes the pen out of his hand. His tongue is stilled by the superabundance of life in the mystery of God. He is silent, not because he has nothing further to say; he is silent because he has been allowed a glimpse into the inexpressible depths of that mystery which is not reached by any human thought or speech’ (Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 45, in Kenneth Leech, ‘Silence and Ministry’ in *The Merton Journal* 25.1 (2018), pp. 43-46 (p. 44).

because he has learned that 'to *read seriously* the good things that are there' brings 'an immediate change for the better, a sense of presence, a recovery of reality, etc.'¹¹ Merton the reader was describing an experience familiar to readers of Merton.

These preliminary comments about the circumstances of the production of an essay illustrate the kind of detail Merton gives us, detail which sets him apart from other theological writers and establishes a way of engagement which can only circumvent the personal dimension by determined effort. He gives us a variety of material to assist our interpreting his context and circumstances, and why he thinks what he thinks: journals and letters reveal not only clues about Merton's state of mind during this period, but also about his physical health. During the first week of August 1965 he was 'in St. Anthony's hospital, under a strict medical and dietary regime and with nine hours of sleep each night. The hospital Sisters surrounded him with thoughtfulness, bringing in magazines and even a box of candy'.¹² J. Howard Griffin's summary of this episode alludes to another formative and disruptive strand of the late narrative: it was Griffin's account of the hermitage years which, when published in 1983, made widely known Merton's relationship in the spring and summer of 1966 with a nurse from St. Joseph's Infirmary, and his transient imaginings of a future contrasting starkly with that of the hermit. Monica Furlong in her earlier biography had passed over the matter in a couple of paragraphs.¹³ When Griffin became so ill that he was unable to continue working, Michael Mott was appointed to further the official biographical work. It was Mott's version, published in 1984, which made more widely known some detail about this aspect of Merton's story. Publication from the period was

¹¹ *Dancing*, p. 280.

¹² Griffin, *Follow*, p. 43.

¹³ Furlong, *Merton*, p. 314.

initially highly restricted, and personal journals were eventually published in 1997, with some parts remaining restricted.

Merton's health, moods, relationships and preoccupations may to some readers seem irrelevant, even distracting; yet this is precisely the kind of detail with which he surrounds his more formal work, producing a multidimensional tapestry of overlapping and interwoven elements which is untidily human and subjective, in the face of dehumanizing, reductive forms more suited to a culture of technique and abstraction. Merton's writing style demonstrates what he meant by an emphasis on the person, and a resistance to reductive or data-driven communication. Hermeneutic methods limited to extrapolating and organizing ideas distilled from this or any other formal essay simply miss a distinctive way in which Merton continues to communicate, as readers are drawn into traces of a world he once inhabited, and a network of interpersonal interactions which constitute that world. The point is intensified when reading or hearing what Merton had to say about communicating; for in reading or hearing him we are experiencing the very thing of which he was writing or speaking. We are implicated in the practice and its extension into our present reading sites.

5.1.2 On Not Being Any Thing

A violently upset stomach accompanied Merton's office clear-out, symptomatic (he concluded) of 'a kind of alienation'¹⁴ or of 'futility and interminable self-contradiction'.¹⁵ He went on to say that 'if I try to conceive myself as, on top of all this, "being a hermit" absurdity reaches its culmination. Yet I am convinced I am on the right way.'¹⁶ In similar

¹⁴ *Dancing*, p. 280 (entry for 14 August).

¹⁵ *Dancing*, p. 281 (entry for 17 August).

¹⁶ *Dancing*, p. 281.

fashion, Merton had written on 18 June of his desire to break free from 'habits of awareness' which manifest in the kinds of 'program and artifice' surrounding notions of being 'a solitary' or indeed any other pre-conceived model; 'for "being anything" is a distraction. It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with only hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth, rising and going to bed'.¹⁷ In his preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* written two years previously, he had expressed a need to 'not retain the semblance of a self which is an object or a "thing"' for he 'must be no-thing' in awareness that Christ lives in him, as Christ lives in the midst of people, 'unknowable and unrecognizable because he is no-thing'.¹⁸ If the early autobiography was in some ways a narration of the author's desire 'to be a saint', he expresses distaste in later writings for talk of being a particular thing.¹⁹ This instinct ran deep. Merton had abiding recollections of when he had felt as though he had been treated as an object:

As an orphan, I went through the business of being passed around from family to family, and being a 'ward,' and an 'object of charitable concern,' etc. etc. I know how inhuman and frustrating that can be – being treated as a thing and not as a person. And reacting against it with dreams that were sometimes shattered in a most inhuman way, through nobody's fault, just because they were dreams.²⁰

¹⁷ *Dancing*, p. 257. Merton reports that the previous day he had corrected the proof of an article on eremitism and was concerned about appearing 'to publicize solitude in the Order, or to be crusading for it!' (same page). Merton's preferred style is better represented by 'Day of a Stranger', the journal version of which was written 'sometime in May 1965' (*Dancing*, pp. 237-242), with an edited version published in May 1966 (also in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, pp. 232-239), shortly before the essay on symbolism.

¹⁸ 'Nanae', p. 73. In his short essay, 'The Cell', Merton writes that 'in any vocation at all, we must distinguish the grace of the call itself and the preliminary image of ourselves which we spontaneously and almost unconsciously assume to represent the truth of our calling. Sooner or later this image must be destroyed and give place to the concrete reality of the vocation *as lived* in the actual mysterious plan of God, which necessarily contains many elements we could never have foreseen' ('The Cell' in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 252-259 (pp. 253-54)).

¹⁹ When Merton writes 'Certainly I find in myself not the slightest inclination to "be" anything but "Catholic"' (*Conjectures*, p. 246), it is in the context of reflecting critically on Church structures, and an implicit question about whether other denominations or institutions might be preferable.

²⁰ From a letter to Robert Lawrence Williams, 'a young black tenor... born in Louisville, Kentucky [who] wrote to Thomas Merton in 1964 on behalf of the National Foundation for African Students' (p. 587) in William H. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 605.

Thus Merton sensitizes the reader-researcher to any tendency to slip into objectification of the author, and also to any tendency to 'freeze' a particular version of Merton. He made similar comments about being a mystic during his travels to Alaska during his final year; saying that whilst:

it is perfectly right that there are mystics in contemplative communities, often it is better if they don't know it, because real mysticism is something very simple and it should remain simple. The worst thing that can happen is for a person to say, 'I am a mystic; Father said in the confessional that I am really a mystic.' This is not only useless; it is harmful because it means that one reflects upon one's self as an object.²¹

Merton went on to emphasize the clear rationale he had over the years sought to capture in so many words; that in contemplative prayer the distinction between subject and object simply dissolves.

5.1.3 Communicating About Communicating

On 15 March 1964 Merton wrote to Nicaraguan-born writer José Coronel Urtecho, who was planning to publish a reader of Merton's work. Urtecho was the uncle of Ernesto Cardenal, encouraged by Merton to return from the Gethsemani novitiate to Nicaragua and the community of Solentiname.²² Merton began by expressing gratitude for the continuing and extended contact, because 'what is important is not the project but the communion of which the project is an expression'.²³ This message was personal and specific, but there are grounds for pursuing the possibility that there is a more general sense in which Merton prioritized communion over the literary projects of which (from his perspective) they were expression. We may be justified even in concluding that priorities were no different (even if

²¹ 'The Life That Unifies' in *Alaskan*, pp. 143-155 (p. 144), adapted from a recording of a conference at a Day of Recollection in 1968.

²² In his poem, 'Death of Thomas Merton', Cardenal writes 'You said to me: the | Gospel never mentions contemplation' (Ernesto Cardenal, *Marilyn Monroe and Other Poems* trans. by Robert Pring-Mill (London: Search Press, 1975), pp. 119-134 (p. 125)).

²³ *Courage*, p. 171.

dynamics clearly are) in relation to future readers. In our present reception of Merton, the reading and writing do not matter for their own sake, but for the sake of the communion they express and foster.

In a letter to Urtecho on 30 June 1965 Merton commented on the symbolism essay around which this present chapter revolves, then ‘to the original idea of this letter: the joy of being able to communicate with friends, in a world where there is so much noise and very little contact.’²⁴ In March 1964 he had written that being in the monastery would be of little profit if it did not allow him in some sense ‘to be everywhere’, responsive to ‘love that breaks through limits set by national pride and the arrogance of wealth and power’.²⁵ In June 1965 he continued in a more sombre mood, indirectly explaining why it was such a joy to communicate with friends:

We cannot realize the extent of our trouble and our risk, and yet we do not know what to do – except to go on being human. This in itself is already an achievement. And we hope that since God became man, there is nothing greater for us than simply to be men ourselves, and persons in His image, and accept the risks and torments of a confused age.²⁶

Similar thoughts - about the simple joy of being human and experiencing his connectedness with human others – lie at the heart of a well-worn passage of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, which was soon to be published, and which will be considered in the next chapter. The letter to Urtecho, meanwhile, emphasized gratitude for the more specific kind of communicating between reader-writers who find resonance with one another: ‘Really it is to me a very moving thing and a great grace to have someone like yourself read my work

²⁴ *Courage*, p. 175. Just before this Merton writes, ‘I am thinking of sending Pablo Antonio a new essay on symbolism for the magazine. It is written originally for a magazine in India, and is being typed now’ (p. 175).

²⁵ *Courage*, p. 171 then p. 172.

²⁶ *Courage*, p. 175.

and respond to it so completely.²⁷ The generous and attentive response to his writing encouraged Merton 'to continue and to say as plainly and as energetically as [he could], the things that need to be said'.²⁸ He was hopeful because of 'a genuinely human level of communication [...] a real exchange on a deep level'.²⁹ He had just finished writing the essay about 'the deepest' kind of communicating.

The deep communication for which Merton expressed gratitude in his letter to Urtecho depended solely upon reading and writing – though there had been face-to-face relationship with the intermediary, Ernesto Cardenal. His writing mediated and performed friendship described as deep communication. This correspondence between two living persons is clearly not the same kind of interaction as that between readers and the extant writing of a dead author; but what we might take from it is an understanding of the degree to which 'deep communication' mattered to Merton at the time, how it was nurtured through reading and writing, and how friendship seems to have taken priority over, say, affirmation of ideas or appreciation of artistry. Urtecho, notwithstanding the actual exchanges, also derived impressions of the monk from literature and the recollections of a person who had once known Merton in the flesh, just as we do.

5.1.4 The Literary Context of the Essay

Merton mentioned to Urtecho several pieces of work recently completed, including an essay 'written originally for a magazine in India'.³⁰ In the journal entry for 18 June 1965, he interrupted reflections on the ordinariness of solitude being preferable to the idea of being

²⁷ *Courage*, p. 175. The next two quotations are from the same letter and page.

²⁸ *Courage*, p. 127.

²⁹ *Courage*, p. 127.

³⁰ *Courage*, p. 175.

a solitary ('for "being anything" is a distraction') with a note that he 'ought to get on to the article on symbolism'.³¹ Twelve days later it was being typed up. It appeared in the Indian journal *Mountain Path* in October 1966,³² a month before Doubleday published *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. It later appeared in *Monastic Exchange 2*,³³ with a Spanish version ('Simbolismo comunicación o communion?'), translated by Baica Davalos, appearing in *Zona Franca (Caracas) 4*³⁴ and in a later compilation edited by Miguel Grinberg. The essay became widely available as part of the posthumous collection, *Love and Living*,³⁵ and is included in Patrick O'Connell's 2013 compilation, *Thomas Merton Selected Essays*.

Amongst the steady flow of publications from Merton during this period of transition to full-time eremitic living were 'Barth's Dream and Other Conjectures' (in the *Sewanee Review*, January 1965), 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air' (in *New Blackfriars*, September 1965) and 'Truth and Crisis: Pages from a Monastic Notebook' (in *Gandhi Marg*, October 1965), which would each become portions of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. In the preface the author tells us that the book was reconstituted from notebooks 'kept since 1956'; so whilst he was preparing the Symbolism essay, Merton was reacquainting himself

³¹ *Dancing*, p. 257.

³² The article is on pp. 339-48 of *Mountain Path* 3. Patrick O'Connell in his introduction to the essay in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (pp. 240-257) writes of 'The Mountain Path (3: 339-48), which Merton tells James Laughlin was "published at the ashram of one of the former great Indian saints of our time, Ramana Maharashi" (*Merton and Laughlin, Selected Letters*, p. 331), the same journal in which "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World" had appeared the previous year. Though Laughlin himself planned to reprint what he called this "wonderful essay... since it says so much, so well and forcefully, that I myself believe" (*Merton and Laughlin, Selected Letters*, p. 328), as the lead piece in a subsequent *New Directions Annual*, this did not in fact happen' (*Selected Essays*, p. 140). This is incorrect, as I have a copy of the anthology, *New Directions 20* ed. by J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1968) in which the opening essay (pp. 1-15) is Merton's symbolism essay.

³³ Summer 1970, pp. 1-10.

³⁴ December 1968, pp. 3-17. This is not the magazine mentioned by Merton in his letter to Urtecho (*Courage*, p. 175).

³⁵ 'Symbolism: Communication or Communion?' in *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 54-79.

relatively intensively with previous reflections and the memories they triggered, and had a detailed sense of the nature and scope of a large part of the literary and audio legacy he would bequeath future readers.

5.1.5 Scholarly Perspectives on the Symbolism Essay

O'Connell introduces the essay as an argument about epistemology, emphasizing Merton's conviction that:

authentic symbolism is an irreplaceable vehicle of a participatory, holistic way of knowing that is largely disregarded and threatened by the rise of a culture based on quantification and a pseudo-scientific objectivity predicated on the exclusive epistemological validity of the indicative sign.³⁶

In O'Connell's reading of Merton, the symbol contrasts with the sign in its 'capacity to mediate a contemplative awareness, a recognition of Being transcending the distinction between subject and object – a *via positiva* experience of wisdom that complements the apophatic way of darkness and emptiness'.³⁷ For this reason, art, myth and ritual are crucial where they 'enable humans to surrender their empirical selves, their individual egos, and so to enter into communion with the Center of all reality'.³⁸ O'Connell notes Merton's point that art, myth and ritual can be used for, or bring about, other effects including a sense of unity around 'an illusory center', in which instance symbolism may have degenerated into idolatry.

O'Connell highlights Merton's focus on ways of knowing, but he does not go so far as to suggest that this might be a way of *knowing Merton*, or of knowing *through* Merton. Neither does he pursue the fact that Merton not only writes about art and myth but, through the

³⁶ *Selected Essays*, p. 240.

³⁷ *Selected Essays*, p. 240.

³⁸ *Selected Essays*, p. 240.

artistic, mythic re-presentation of his own day-to-day living and thinking, his own person-in-relationship, he himself becomes a mediating vehicle of 'a contemplative awareness, a recognition of Being transcending the distinction between subject and object'.³⁹ Indeed, through his particular way of nurturing intersubjectivity, Merton can establish a relational dialectic which retains elements of tension proper to hospitable encounter with difference, which is at the same time more fully human than a merely philosophical or even religious transcendence of any distinction between subject and object.

David Cooper concludes that this is the essay which above all reveals the extent of Marcuse's influence on Merton, specifically in the way it resonates with ideas in Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*.⁴⁰ Arguing that Merton's use of Marcuse's work is similar to his use of Erich Fromm's analysis of alienation in *The Sane Society*,⁴¹ Cooper describes how Merton extrapolates from Marcuse the notion that 'the functionalization of discourse had been accompanied by a gradual *dysfunctionalization* of symbolic language'.⁴² In Marcuse, this functional language is 'anti-critical and anti-dialectical', a system in which 'operational and behavioural rationality absorbs the transcendent, negative, oppositional elements of Reason'.⁴³

³⁹ *Selected Essays*, p. 240.

⁴⁰ David D. Cooper *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989, p. 254. On 23 July 1968 Merton wrote to Dom Jean Leclercq about arrangements for Bangkok, saying 'I've familiarized myself pretty well with Herbert Marcuse, whose ideas are so influential in the "student revolts" of the time. I must admit that I find him closer to monasticism than many theologians.' (*Survival or Prophecy?: The Correspondence of Jean Leclercq and Thomas Merton*, Monastic Wisdom Series 17, ed. and intro. by Patrick Hart (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 129.

⁴¹ Cooper, pp. 254-255.

⁴² Cooper, p. 255.

⁴³ Cooper, p. 255.

The resonances between Merton and Marcuse are clear enough, and Marcuse is repeatedly cited in Merton's late work. A problem with Cooper's argument, however, is that it is by no means clear that Merton had even read Marcuse before writing the symbolism essay. Only one suggestion is traceable, a letter from Merton to Victor Hammer on 3 March 1963, in which he includes 'H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, 1955' in a list of library requests. Whether or not Merton received the book is not mentioned.⁴⁴ It was only on 5 June 1968 that Merton mentioned being 'about finished with Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*—a good and important book.'⁴⁵ He may have only received it recently, though had already cited Marcuse in conference with contemplative nuns the previous week.

David Cooper writes, 'Although the symbol is useless as a means of communication, Merton emphasized its higher purpose, "the purpose of going beyond practicality and purpose, beyond cause and effect."' ⁴⁶ Merton does not in fact say that a symbol is useless as a means of communication, but as a means of *simple* communication. There are other communicative processes, such as the way in which a symbol can bring together 'the visible and the invisible as a meaningful unity'.⁴⁷ In limiting his discussion to the explicit content of Merton's work and an emphasis on symbolic language, Cooper does not go so far as to consider the possibility that Merton is describing a way of communicating to which he

⁴⁴ The letter is included in *The Letters of Thomas Merton and Victor and Carolyn Hammer*, ed. by F. Douglas Scutchfield and Paul Evans Holbrook Jr. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), p.167. I am grateful to Mark Meade at the Merton Center for responding to my enquiry, replying: 'I don't know whether Hammer got it for him at this time. It is not among the marginalia we have at the Center. For the most part, Merton is probably getting interlibrary loan books from University of Kentucky. Currently, Univ. of Kentucky has the second edition from 1966 not the earlier 1955 edition. It would be difficult to know if the library even had the earlier edition' (personal email, 17 July 2018).

⁴⁵ *Other Side*, p. 125, where Merton writes: 'It was sent by the Asphodel Bookshop in exchange for some copies of *Monks Pond*'. Reference to *One-Dimensional Man* is at p.148 of *Springs of Contemplation*, in a transcript of conversations with women religious at Gethsemani Abbey in May 1968.

⁴⁶ Cooper, p. 255, citing *Love and Living*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ *Love and Living*, p. 56.

himself (as a person, and as a body of literature) aspires, as he goes on communicating with those in whom ‘spiritual resonances’ awaken in response ‘to the symbol not only as *sign* but as “sacrament” and “presence”.’⁴⁸

The idea of Merton as presence has been discussed in a previous chapter; but what of the reference to sacrament? Merton’s reflections on baptism during the mid-1950s may offer a clue. In *No Man is an Island*, whose very title alerts readers to a focus on connectedness, Merton writes of the sacrament of baptism in terms of every person’s ‘vocation to *be* someone’⁴⁹ (contrasting with the idea of being a ‘thing’, as discussed earlier in this chapter) which can only be fulfilled when the person understands vocation as a living of their particularity, their givenness. He continues:

Yet we have said that baptism gives us a sacramental character, defining our vocation in a very particular way since it tells us we must become ourselves in Christ. [...] What does this mean? We must be ourselves by being Christ. For a man, to be is to love. A man only lives as a man when he knows truth and loves what he knows and acts according to what he loves. In this way he *becomes* the truth that he loves.⁵⁰

It is through participating as more than observer in the textual traces of Merton’s becoming that readers can experience something sacramental in their engagement with Merton, such that his reference to responding to symbol as ‘sacrament’ is not itself a barrier to our reading this essay as a clue to how Merton aspired to communicate, or does in fact communicate, whether or not he was consciously thinking in those terms. In the most

⁴⁸ *Love and Living*, p. 54.

⁴⁹ *No Man Is An Island* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1955), p. 118. William Shannon noted that the book may have emerged from Merton’s lectures given to scholastics and newly ordained priests, and ‘grew out of an earlier text of thirty pages that Merton called “Sentences,” about which he wrote to Sr. Therese Lentfoehr in 1959, telling her that it was probably better than “the long-winded finished book.”’ (*The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, p. 327).

⁵⁰ *No Man*, p. 118.

obvious sense, he was an embodiment of what is discovered, through love, to be true - which is one way in which he defines sacramentality.⁵¹

In other reflections on the 'Symbolism' essay, Ross Labrie concludes that, for Merton, 'symbolism operated on the basis of analogy to unite disparate parts of experience into a re-created whole'.⁵² Dealing with Merton's reflections on the meta-symbol, Labrie does not go so far as to suggest that the author might himself function like the meta-symbol, unifying disparate parts of experience (as well as varied, and at times seemingly incommensurate, sources and ideas) into a re-created whole. The whole is the life of the author, however inaccessible to readers, whilst the various elements of the corpus interact in a reader's consciousness (in ways which will be considered in more detail in the next chapter), not only reconstituting impressions of the author, but illuminating ways in which the fragments of our own experience hold together as elements of a more fundamental unity, which is the self hidden even from ourselves until glimpsed in Christ:

Because of the way in which symbols brought together different aspects of experience into a whole, he maintained that symbols could absorb apparently contradictory elements in a manner that would cause reason to recoil. In yoking such contradictory elements within artistic symbolism, even without reconciling them, Merton noted, the reader or spectator was led to a point beyond the contradictory fragments to a totality, being itself, that acted like a solvent for the separated and even ostensibly conflicting fragments.⁵³

This might feasibly be the case not simply for an overarching, abstract notion of 'being itself' but also in relation to impressions of a particular historical being. As a 'story of one series of responses to and reflections of the currents and structures of the world',⁵⁴ as 'the form, the

⁵¹ *Love and Living*, p. 74.

⁵² Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, p. 166.

⁵³ Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, pp. 166-167.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 18.

configuration of a wider reality expressed in one place,⁵⁵ it is Merton who brings together 'different aspects of experience into a whole' by his own capacity to 'absorb apparently contradictory elements in a manner that would cause reason to recoil'. The reader who, with Merton, can abide with 'such contradictory elements ... even without reconciling them' may also be 'led to a point beyond the contradictory fragments' – without insisting on inadequate notions of totality or completeness. The one life which communicates is itself a unifying phenomenon, a fact veiled by misguided notions of 'emptying Merton out of his writing', which would undermine his distinctive way of relating:

revelation and spiritual vision are contained in symbols not in order that one may extract them from the symbol and study them or appropriate them intellectually apart from the symbol itself. Revealed truth is made present concretely and existentially in symbols, and is grasped in and with the symbol by a living response of the subject.⁵⁶

The idea of revelation being 'contained' in symbols is problematic; but the chief point here is about the inseparability of communicated vision and its vehicle of communication. Which, I am saying, is not the historical author as such, but the persona experienced by readers, imagined in response to the author's self-expression and other recollections of his life and speech. Between a reader and the cumulative effect of texts, revealed truth is made present and appropriated 'by a living response of the subject' whose appreciation of symbolism 'implies a certain view of reality itself, a certain cosmology and a religious metaphysic of being, above all a spiritual view of man'.⁵⁷

Merton says that the kind of response he is describing 'defies exact analysis and cannot be accurately described to one who does not experience it authentically in himself'.⁵⁸ There

⁵⁵ *Silent Action*, p. 17.

⁵⁶ *Love and Living*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ *Love and Living*, p. 68.

⁵⁸ *Love and Living*, p. 57.

is a limit to what can be communicated where there is no pre-understanding already nurtured 'by living spiritual traditions and by contact with a spiritual master (*guru*), or at least with a vital and creative liturgy and a traditional doctrine'.⁵⁹ The capacity for this kind of seeing, in other words, comes with training, which may mean the 'training' implicit in regular participation in a worshipping congregation. The efficacy of the symbol depends upon prior interaction with 'spiritual traditions', a spiritual *guru*, a vital and creative liturgy or doctrine. The symbolism does not work in isolation from other sources of knowing, but 'revives our awareness of what we already know' and 'deepens that awareness'.⁶⁰

Symbolism may lead to 'discovery of a new depth and a new actuality in what IS and always has been'; more specifically 'to manifest a union that *already exists but is not fully realized*'.⁶¹ If symbolism revives awareness of what is already known, and if the symbolism essay feasibly describes a way in which Merton communicates, then it helps that Merton was (as Williams calls him) 'a massively unoriginal man':

he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment he finds himself in – America between the wars, classical pre-conciliar Catholicism and monasticism, the peace movement, Asia. In all these contexts he is utterly 'priestly' because utterly *attentive*: he does not organize, dominate, or even interpret, much of the time, but responds.⁶²

Merton channels that by which he is absorbed. What absorbs him may, of course, be unfamiliar to the reader, but his revivifying of what *is* familiar can hold the reader not only in relation to Merton, but to less familiar aspects of the wider tradition he represented.

⁵⁹ *Love and Living*, p. 57.

⁶⁰ *Love and Living*, p. 68.

⁶¹ Both quotations are from *Love and Living*, p. 68, and the italics are Merton's.

⁶² Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 19.

Following a parody of pointless intercontinental communication, Merton asks whether it matters that there may be 'no really serious information to communicate'. Was not this apparently pointless communicating at least 'an expression of friendship, therefore of love' and therefore 'more important than factual information? Were these friends not seeking *communion* even more than communication?'⁶³ He affirms that love and communion are indeed most important, but 'where communion is no longer understood, and where, in fact, communication is regarded as primary, because "practical," then people are reduced to making a *symbolically useless* use of expensive means of communication, in an effort to achieve communion'.⁶⁴

There are forms of pseudo-communion in which the communicating has no symbolically-rich value, because there is no awakening or restoration of something which is, on some level at least, already known (as described above). Specifically, Merton refers to a sense of union to which 'living spiritual traditions' continually point, 'the awareness of participation in an ontological or religious reality: in the mystery of being, of human love, of redemptive mystery, of contemplative truth'.⁶⁵ This is what he means here by communion, a participative awareness he seeks to awaken or cultivate.

An outstanding factor to be addressed is Merton's distinguishing between the effects of the symbol and 'contact with a spiritual master (*guru*)'. Can Merton be 'spiritual master' and symbol at one and the same time? What Merton was whilst alive is not what Merton

⁶³ *Love and Living*, p. 66 (The italics are Merton's in this and the next quotation).

⁶⁴ *Love and Living*, p. 67. Despite the striking contrast with Merton's earlier writing on the Eucharist in, for example, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), there is a continuity and development worth exploring. Merton describes the reason for cultivating a prayerful Eucharistic life as being 'above all that we may become men of charity, peacemakers in the world, mediators between God and men, instruments of the divine priesthood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our mission is [...] above all, by preaching and by sacrifice, to unite all men in one Mystical Body and offer them all, in Christ, to the Father' (p. xxx).

⁶⁵ *Love and Living*, p. 68.

continues to be, and a body of literature is no substitute for a living guru. Actual interpersonal relationships remain essential, linking the reader into the wider web of relationships through which traditions are continually received and performed. From another perspective, any clear distinction between symbolism and guru breaks down if Merton can sometimes connect like a symbol and sometimes guide like a guru. Much depends on circumstance, the mode of receptivity of the reader, and on the particular writings or recordings we are dealing with. Novitiate teaching materials, for example, are essentially informative, whilst other writings serve well as ways into meditation, or jolt the reader into reconsideration of perspective. As a variety of sources accumulate and interact in readers, Merton can function on more than one level: at times like a guru or teacher, at times as prophetic catalyst, awakening or restoring awareness like the symbols he describes in this essay.

Merton never actually made an explicit connection between the symbolic communicating he describes here, and his own communicative intentions - but we can at least deduce what kind of communicating Merton privileges, and why. There is a contrast between, say, the idea that *Raids* may 'enable a rare person here and there to come alive and be awake at a moment when wakefulness is desirable'⁶⁶ and the emphasis in the symbolism essay on a person's capacity to apprehend the symbol in such a way as to awaken response in their own being. Both, however, are about a kind of communication which brings about awakening, and the different descriptions may not amount to significantly different experiences. The author of *Raids* simply personifies his book which, no less than any symbol, requires work on the reader's part. That work involves a willingness to

⁶⁶ *Raids*, pp. 2-3.

'give oneself up' to the writing, for example in the manner described by Pramuk (who also refers to Merton as a 'spiritual master') in the midst of his study of the emergence of a sophianic Christology in Merton. In relation to Abraham Heschel's allusion to giving oneself up to music, Pramuk writes of readers who 'come to Merton's writings in much the same way' and discover that 'his writing bears us, body and soul, into the heart of the Christian Good News, such that one can begin not only to hear and see it, but believe it'.⁶⁷ This is the nature of that form of communication which tends towards communion, which provokes or restores belief 'that one is loved, that one belongs in the world, that human life has meaning and purpose in the vast cosmos'.⁶⁸ What is kindled by this love, through writing which electrifies, is a 'spiritual freedom that is already given to us, in God, from the beginning'.⁶⁹ Giving oneself over to the writing is, in this instance, equivalent to giving oneself over to a spiritual master. The guru and the text are almost interchangeable, and Merton functions like the symbol which expresses, and encourages acceptance of, a person's 'own ontological roots in a mystery of being that transcends his individual ego'.⁷⁰ A sense of awakening to being loved and belonging in a world with meaning and purpose merges with awareness of participation in an inter-relatedness which undergirds the kind of 'living and fruitful relationship' which ultimately constitute a 'more real' world.⁷¹ Symbolism, as described in this essay, potentially awakens a sense of communion 'with the mysterious sources of vitality and meaning, of creativity, love, and truth, to which he cannot have direct

⁶⁷ *Sophia*, p. 126. The next two quotes are from the same page. Pramuk quotes a fuller version of the Heschel passage on pp. 64-65

⁶⁸ Pramuk, p. 126.

⁶⁹ Pramuk, p. 126.

⁷⁰ *Love and Living*, p. 65.

⁷¹ See 'Learning to Live' in *Love and Living*, pp. 3-14 (p. 3): 'The world is made up of the people who are fully alive in it: that is, of the people who can be themselves in it and can enter into a living and fruitful relationship with each other in it.'

access by means of science and technique'.⁷² If this is something akin to what Merton seeks to awaken as writer-monk, then much depends on our mode of engagement. There is a limit to what can be attained through the type of analysis in which I am presently engaged; whereas the kind of imaginative, interpersonal interaction described earlier in this thesis may lead directly towards a more intuitive awareness that:

the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. [...] Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. [...] we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.⁷³

5.1.6 Communication or Communion: Further Points to Note

Merton introduces this essay as 'a few bare intuitions' which 'may suggest further lines of thought in the mind of the reader'.⁷⁴ From the outset his intention is interactive and collaborative, a stimulus to further creativity and active participation on the part of readers. The author, like the symbol he describes, sets out 'not to increase the quantity of our knowledge and information but to deepen and enrich the *quality* of life itself'⁷⁵ and to foster communion with sources of vitality, meaning, creativity, love and truth. Merton does not close down by overly precise definition what those 'mysterious sources' might actually be in any given situation. He does however have more specific things to say about the nature of the communion into which the symbol draws readers. It is beyond the 'division where subject and object stand over against one another' whereas simple communication 'takes place between subject and object.'⁷⁶ Communion is participation, 'a sharing in basic unity'

⁷² *Love and Living*, p. 68.

⁷³ 'Thomas Merton's View of Monasticism (Informal talk delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)' in *The Asian Journal*, pp. 305-08 (p. 308).

⁷⁴ *Love and Living*, p. 54.

⁷⁵ *Love and Living*, p. 68.

⁷⁶ *Love and Living*, p. 73.

which Christianity understands 'as a special gift of God, a work of grace, which brings us to unity with God and one another in the Holy Spirit'.⁷⁷ Merton compares the concept with a comparative understanding in Asian religious traditions where the unity is described as occurring 'in Absolute Being (Atman) or in the Void (Sunyata)'.⁷⁸ He is careful to avoid saying that the approaches towards unity are theologically equivalent. Rather, the 'difference between the two approaches is the difference between an ontologist mysticism and a theological revelation: between a return to an Absolute Nature and surrender to a Divine Person'.⁷⁹

The distinction is crucial. The communion Merton describes is more than awareness of, say, ecological interdependence, even if this essential interconnectedness is implied in Merton's declaration that 'we are already one'. Interpersonal relationality and surrendered autonomy imply active response to an intuition, or theological revelation, of relationship with a Divine Person, however conceived. It is a short step from that possibility to the conclusion that the Merton corpus, a combination of resonant words and the life to which they testify, might mediate an understanding of unity between persons, and between a person and sources of vitality and meaning. Though the 'abstractly formulated official doctrines'⁸⁰ are differently constructed, the symbols of different religions can still be seen to have something in common, and the commonality is discovered in interpersonal exchange. Like the symbol he is describing, Merton himself 'does not merely point the way to the One

⁷⁷ *Love and Living*, p. 73.

⁷⁸ *Love and Living*, p. 73.

⁷⁹ *Love and Living*, p. 73.

⁸⁰ *Love and Living*, p. 73.

as object' because as 'long as the One is regarded as object, it is not the One'.⁸¹ Rather, like the symbol he is describing, in priestly fashion he 'reveals that the subjectivity of the subject is [...] deeply rooted in the infinite God' and 'opens the believer's inner eye, the eye of the heart, to the realization that he must come to be centered in God'.⁸² Again, what he writes of symbolism seems to work as description of a way in which he himself might hope to continue communicating as priest and monk, though to say so directly would be self-defeating. Merton by this stage had learned, like the symbol he described in one of the most telling sentences, 'to accept [...] contradiction in order to point beyond it'.⁸³ In accepting the same, readers can find themselves, with Merton and with one another, participating 'in the religious presence of the saving and illuminating One'.⁸⁴

5.1.7 *Like a Symbol, Not As a Symbol*

In this sustained reflection on contrasting modes of communication, Merton distinguishes between communion-oriented types of interaction on the one hand and, on the other, technique-driven forms which either conceal or fail to serve relational ends. It seems reasonable to conclude that Merton considered his own communicating with future readers in terms of the distinction he makes in this late essay, especially if his publishing into the future is recognized as an extension of his overarching monastic practice. In other words, we might look for ways in which our engagements with Merton are like the ways in which he describes engaging with symbols. Which is not the same as saying that Merton is a symbol. It is not always an easy distinction to make, but the point may matter if describing Merton

⁸¹ *Love and Living*, p. 74. On his fiftieth birthday, 31 January 1965, Merton wrote of the 'unutterable confusion of those who think that God is a mental object and that to love "God Alone" is to exclude all other objects to concentrate on this one! Fatal. Yet that is why so many misunderstand the meaning of contemplation and solitude, and condemn it' (*Dancing*, p. 200).

⁸² *Love and Living*, p. 75.

⁸³ *Love and Living*, p. 74.

⁸⁴ *Love and Living*, p. 74.

as any kind of 'thing' perpetuates an unhelpful objectification, where the aim is to highlight a reader's sense of intersubjectivity. I have already discussed Merton's reluctance to being imagined as any 'thing' (see 5.1.2), though the temptation is high (see 1.3.1). An example is Anthony Padovano's *The Human Journey*, subtitled 'Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century'. Padovano's meaning contrasts with the point I have been pursuing. His preface begins:

There are people in every era who manage somehow to represent its character. It is not always the uniqueness of their thought or the singularity of their accomplishments that does this. They become symbols because they feel and personalize the forces of an age more deeply and comprehensively than others. Thomas Merton is such a man.⁸⁵

Padovano implies that Merton effectively represents something of his own time and context, which is a static assignation assuming generally recognized characteristics of the era (in this case a century) that Merton is said to represent. This in itself is problematic (and all the more so when representation is described in terms of uniqueness), but equally problematic is the prospect of its being true. If Merton does just represent the character of a century, then we lose sight of his deracinating effect and the potentially transformative tension he sustains by living between worlds, in 'no man's land', as he once put it.

Merton also tends to emphasize an effect, a process, an interaction rather than an object when describing the way in which a symbol 'in some way makes us aware of the inner meaning of life and of reality itself' and 'takes us to the center of the circle, not to another point of the circumference'.⁸⁶ To describe Merton as a symbol is to risk reinforcing a tendency to objectification and an over-emphasis on the over-published, over-discussed 'Merton of Merton Studies', which Williams and others have warned against. Earlier in this

⁸⁵ Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), p. xv. A new edition of the book was published in 2014 as *The Spiritual Genius of Thomas Merton* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2014).

⁸⁶ *Love and Living*, pp. 54-55.

chapter I made a point about Merton seeking to avoid being thought of, and thinking of himself, as any 'thing'. So in this study I have attempted to keep returning to focus on reader experiences of intersubjectivity, or interactions between readers and text, or between readers and an imagined Merton reconstituted from text. The distinction is equivalent to a focus on the processes Merton describes as symbolism, rather than discussion of particular symbols.

5.2 Communicating for Communion: Reframing Faith-based Resistance to Divisive Dehumanization

The interwoven themes of communication and communion were uppermost in Merton's thinking when, towards the end of his life, he addressed members of the Spiritual Summit Conference at the Temple of Understanding in Calcutta on 22 October 1968.⁸⁷ Merton was on a long-awaited and far-reaching journey away from the monastery which had been home for half his life; a journey which would end prematurely with his death weeks later at another conference, in Bangkok, Thailand. A transcription of the talk is included as an appendix in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, as are the notes he prepared for the talk. The contrast between the transcript (tidied up for publication) and his preparatory notes echoes the contrast between audio recordings of his classes and the teaching notes prepared for those classes: person to person, Merton was not constrained by his own scripts.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *Asian*, p. 308. Merton completed only part of his planned journey. The full itinerary is described in the film, *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*, prod. by Morgan Atkinson (Duckworks, 2014).

⁸⁸ *The Asian Journal* was compiled and edited by James Laughlin, Naomi Stone and Patrick Hart, and published in 1973. A description of the editing is included in Ian S. MacNiven, 'More Than Scribe: James Laughlin, Thomas Merton and The Asian Journal' in *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013), pp. 43-53.

At the Calcutta event, where he spoke of the deepest level of communication which is wordless communion, beyond speech and concept, the geography of descent contrasts with *The Ascent to Truth* or the archetypal Dantean ascent up *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Discovery takes place at the depths rather than the peaks. The imagery is not of climbing but of immersion, or perhaps of mining for buried treasure. Merton was speaking with the conviction of discovery rather than of speculation, and with a desire to communicate his sense of that underlying archaic connectedness beneath an imagined disunity which masks awareness even of its very existence. Participants at a meeting at the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1996, a gathering of Buddhist and Christian 'spiritual leaders, teachers and practitioners' testified that Merton's 'prophetic words were not a lyrical flight or a utopian dream'.⁸⁹ They had substance born of hard-won experience.

Introducing the closing prayer of that First Spiritual Summit Conference, Merton again spoke of depth, describing 'the Real' in terms of 'what is deep', contrasting with 'things that are on the surface'.⁹⁰ What he invoked from the depths of those present was a 'love that unites us, the love that unites us in spite of real differences, real emotional friction'.⁹¹ Merton prayed: 'let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one spirit which makes You [God] present in the world, and which makes You witness to the ultimate reality that is love.'⁹² He spoke of an 'original unity' which is given rather than achieved, awareness of which is both gift and effort. The task of recognizing and articulating innate unity is the work of the kind of marginal person he was wanting to be, the kind

⁸⁹ Donald W Mitchell & James Wiseman, OSB, eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1999), pp. xix and xv.

⁹⁰ *Asian Journal*, pp. 318-319.

⁹¹ *Asian Journal*, p. 318.

⁹² *Asian*, pp. 318-319.

amongst whom 'communication on the deepest level is possible' for those who are faithful.⁹³ Awareness calls for response, including practices which sustain awareness and which disperse whatever it is that prevents recognition of unity, or the acting out of its implications. Amongst the barriers to recognition and to performing of this unity are the habits and structures of pseudo-communication formed around enchantment with technique and number, the kind of anti-communication with which Merton previously contrasted religious symbolism.

Speaking on 3 October 1968, at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, a few days before setting out for Asia, in response to a comment about how he would be 'put back in the monastery' on his return, Merton referred in similar fashion to this 'deepest level' of communicating:

The real essence of monasticism is the handing down from master to disciple of an uncommunicable experience. That is to say, an experience that cannot be communicated in words. It can only be communicated on the deepest possible level. And this, it seems to me, with all due respect to everything else that's going on, this to me is the most important thing [...] There is a deeper dimension than psychology. It is a theological dimension, if you admit that theology is something more than dogma, something more than doctrinal formulation about something ultimate.⁹⁴

The something more than dogma and doctrinal formulation is better understood through attention to the form, style and effect of communicating, rather than to propositional or creative content. Granted, these are not readily separable; but in relation to our study of Merton we are reminded that, if we are to take him at his word, then the form and method of his communicative monastic praxis invite our attention every bit as much as any propositional content of the literature.

⁹³ *Asian Journal*, p. 308.

⁹⁴ 'The Center Dialogue' in *Thomas Merton: Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. by Walter Capps ((New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 28-70 (pp. 34-35).

In the Calcutta talk which followed, Merton described a deep communication beyond words and speech; where 'beyond' can mean not only 'greater than' but also 'after' words and speech. He had prepared a paper for the meeting,⁹⁵ in which he described the relationship between what he calls preverbal, verbal and postverbal communication. By 'preverbal' Merton meant 'the unspoken and indefinable "preparation," the "predisposition" of mind and heart' necessary for monastic living.⁹⁶ In Merton's scheme, this predisposition is the ground from which can flourish an attitude 'wide open to life and to new experience' in one who 'has fully utilized his own tradition and gone beyond it' such that s/he can 'meet a disciple of another apparently remote and alien tradition, and find a common ground of verbal understanding with him'.⁹⁷ In the prepared paper, Merton was not describing communication amongst just any people, but specifically between people moulded through disciplined immersion in religious practices. These are they who might move on to the postverbal level 'on which both meet beyond their own words and their own understanding in the silence of an ultimate experience which might conceivably not have occurred if they had not met and spoken'.⁹⁸ It is this postverbal encounter which the paper refers to as 'communion'.

William Apel writes that Merton, as 'a mystic and a prophet' was 'searching for other "universal" men and women who he knew were already out there in the world

⁹⁵ In the informal talk he told his audience that he would 'say one or two things that have nothing to do with' his prepared paper. He continued: 'If you are interested in the paper, it is there for you to read. I do not think it is a terribly good paper. I think there are a lot of other things you could be better employed in doing' (*Asian Journal*, p. 306).

⁹⁶ 'Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue (Notes for a paper to have been delivered at Calcutta, October 1968)' in *The Asian Journal*, pp. 309-317 (pp. 312-13).

⁹⁷ Quotations in this sentence are all from the *Asian Journal*, p. 315, as is the next quotation.

⁹⁸ *Asian Journal*, p. 315.

somewhere'.⁹⁹ Apel cites a letter in which Merton writes to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy about people who 'can become as it were "sacraments" or signs of peace, at least. They can do much to open the minds of their contemporaries to receive, in the future, new seeds of thought'.¹⁰⁰ Merton saw the task of such people as preparatory, 'a kind of arduous and unthankful pioneering',¹⁰¹ which Apel believes to be more important to Merton at the end of his life than any other work. Apel may be correct: striving to become interfaith signs of peace could be a most urgent and effective contribution to the healing of a world torn apart by violent hatred. In this interfaith work, Merton was open to drawing from what is best and most true in human experience, beyond the kind of projected categorization which the very notion of 'interfaith' can imply. Again from the same letter to Coomaraswamy, Apel quotes:

I believe that the only really valid thing that can be accomplished in the direction of world peace and unity at this moment is the preparation of the way by the formation of men who, isolated, perhaps not accepted or understood by any 'movement,' are able to unite in themselves and experience in their own lives all that is best and most true in the numerous spiritual traditions.¹⁰²

This work of breaking down divisive categories of thinking, this seeking of commonalities, is entirely consistent with the 1941 project which became *My Argument with the Gestapo*, which reveals Merton's thinking about war as an outcome of the kind of distorted thinking from whose overwhelming influence he sought to distance himself. The necessary specialist work required of those willing to be 'marginal' involves disciplined contemplation, a

⁹⁹ William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY, 2006), p. xix.

¹⁰⁰ Apel, pp. xix-xx, quoting from Merton's letter of 13 January 1961 to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, in *Hidden Ground*, pp. 126-27 (p. 126). The following quotation is from the same letter. Merton replied on 19 July 1963 to M. R. Chandler of the *San Francisco Examiner*, who had invited him to respond to a questionnaire about book reading, that 'One question you have not asked: about authors whom one might consider too little known and too little read. One of these in my opinion would be the late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, whose field was Oriental art, but who actually had a great deal to say about the meeting of Eastern and Western culture. This is a topic of vital importance today (*Witness to Freedom*, p. 165).

¹⁰¹ *Hidden Ground*, p. 126.

¹⁰² Letter of 13 January 1961 to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy, in *Hidden Ground*, pp. 126-27 (p. 126) and Apel, p. xviii.

particular social location, and communicating. Merton initiated correspondence with people who were in various ways engaged in similar work. Then he published more generally in the hope that his work might reach some ready to wake up or at least to receive new seeds of thought.

5.2.1 With Whom is Merton Communicating?

In July 1968 Merton's 'Renewal in Monastic Education' was published in *Cistercian Studies 3* (1968). The essay is included as 'The Need For a New Education' in the posthumous collection, *Contemplation in a World of Action*.¹⁰³ In this late statement, Merton reaffirmed that 'the monastic experience needs to be communicable in terms which are not utterly foreign to modern man'.¹⁰⁴ Communicating then is witnessing 'not only to a contemplative mystique of silence, enclosure and the renunciation of active works' but also to 'the eschatological mystery of the kingdom already shared and realized in the lives of those who have heard the Word of God and have surrendered unconditionally to its demands in a vocation that (even when communal) has a distinctly "desert" quality'.¹⁰⁵ What is communicated, in other words, is a life which 'presupposes a thirst for the Word of God, a willingness to immerse oneself in meditation of the Bible',¹⁰⁶ a life determinedly oriented according to a biblical counter-narrative. Merton describes as prophetic this communicating of a life intended as daily growth in 'Christian wisdom and understanding'.¹⁰⁷ If we bear in mind what Merton said about the passing on from guru to disciple of what cannot ultimately be communicated in words, then communicating monastic experience 'in terms

¹⁰³ 'The Need For a New Education' in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 198-204.

¹⁰⁴ *Action*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁵ *Action*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁶ *Action*, p. 199.

¹⁰⁷ *Action*, p. 199.

which are not utterly foreign to modern man' is clearly about more than description, explanation and so forth. It is, however, about intelligibility.

No individual, if he wishes to influence others, is totally free to choose his own style of action and persuasion: he is subject to constraints imposed by the culture in which he finds himself. If communication is to take place, there must be constraints which are recognised by both the speaker and his listeners, the artist and his public, the leader and his followers.¹⁰⁸

A. E. Harvey was writing about Jesus communicating with hearers, followers and enemies, and his need 'to speak a language they could understand, perform actions they would find intelligible, and conduct his life and undergo his death in a manner of which they could make some sense'.¹⁰⁹ Had he not worked within such constraints, 'he would have seemed a mere freak, a person too unrelated to the normal rhythm of society to have anything meaningful to say'.¹¹⁰ Yet he was not 'totally subject to these constraints'.¹¹¹ In similar fashion, Merton, more formally constrained than many of us, is most effectively disruptive where his words and choices are entirely intelligible, revealing (like the child who proclaimed the emperor's nakedness) inconsistencies, compromise and deceptions so familiar to us as to no longer register. He cannot, however, be entirely comprehensible in the sense of fitting a pattern already established in our apprehension of the world. An example of such a pattern (and I caricature to make the point) would be a portrayal of Merton as leaving the world behind (interpreted as relinquishing responsibility) then coming back (to where we are, picking up responsibilities he previously evaded), a strangely inverted prodigal son. Merton evidently succeeded in communicating in terms which are 'not utterly foreign', which, indeed, continue to captivate numerous readers. The extent to

¹⁰⁸ A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982), p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Harvey, p. 7.

¹¹⁰ Harvey, p. 7.

¹¹¹ Harvey, p. 7.

which the extant corpus prolongs his historical witness may depend on the degree to which our communicating approximates to the kind of dynamic interaction between texts, traditions, readers and revelations that he described in relation to symbolism. It also depends on the perspective from which, and the level at which, we engage.

For instance, when Merton writes of bearing witness to an eschatological mystery already realized in the lives of those who have surrendered to its demands by embracing a 'desert' vocation, there are some readers included amongst that number and most who are not. The work of sympathetic readers who are not living a desert vocation involves receiving the witness and allowing implications to become apparent, which may be experienced as the type of 'awakening' Merton hoped that *Raids* would achieve. At other times, Merton is describing the kind of communicating and communion experienced amongst people similarly committed to a dedicated contemplative pathway. The form of communion described in the prepared Calcutta paper is a specialized instance of communication, an intentionally inter-monastic encounter, apparently beyond any reader who is not following the more rigorous path. It is these determined disciples who can discover and enact a communion beyond words, the original unity. To these the idea that 'we are already one' has layers of meaning which cannot simply be appropriated by the general reader, who may nevertheless be attuned to other meanings (of ecological or human interdependence, for example) conveyed by the words.¹¹²

in 'The Need for a New Education' Merton identified different types of specialized communications, envisaging communities wherein some monks are 'qualified to share their

¹¹² In its usage as the title of Henry, Gray and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), the phrase has already been extended beyond the more limited scope of Merton's original context.

experience in dialogue with contemplatives from other religious traditions (Buddhists, Hindus, Sufis, etc.)' and 'some who will be willing to speak to those modern intellectuals, whether religious or irreligious, who are intrigued by the mysterious personal dimensions of inner and spiritual experience'.¹¹³ The list of potential dialogue partners reinforces the link with Merton's 1962 portrait of Clement,¹¹⁴ which includes discourse with scientists. In 'The Need for a New Education' he writes:

The qualitative, experiential and personal values developed in monastic life should complement the objective, quantitative and experimental discoveries of science and their exploitation by technology and business. The monastery should by no means be merely an enclave of eccentric and apparently archaic human beings who have rebelled against the world of science and turned their backs on it with a curse.¹¹⁵

Merton as marginal monk does not, in this instance at least, confront the particular ways of thinking which undergirded scientific method, but challenges intentional exploitation of knowledge for purposes contrary to those revealed through the 'qualitative, experiential and personal values developed in monastic life', a life which 'presupposes a thirst for the Word of God'.¹¹⁶ In the end, effective and appropriate communicating is essential because the monk is duty-bound to interpret his vocation in the light of 'the crucial problems of our time [...] race, war, genocide, starvation, injustice, revolution'.¹¹⁷

Readers who relate to Merton but who are in no position to dedicate themselves to rigorous contemplative disciplines are not simply pressed back into being mere admirers or scholars of a life too unlike our own. We share concerns about 'the crucial problems of our time' and can find in the less formal speech at the Calcutta meeting, where he describes

¹¹³ *Action*, pp. 199-200.

¹¹⁴ *Clement of Alexandria, Selections from 'The Proteptikos': An Essay and Translation by Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1963).

¹¹⁵ *Action*, p. 203. Subsequent quotes in this paragraph are from the same page.

¹¹⁶ *Action*, p. 203.

¹¹⁷ *Action*, p. 203.

communion as discovery of an older unity, that Merton was addressing a more varied audience, who cannot be assumed separated from many of the preoccupations, distractions and prevalent discourses of mainstream society. To these, his 'small message of hope' is a reminder at least that 'there are always people who dare to seek on the margins of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine'.¹¹⁸ The monk is a reminder of the fact of choices, as well as the liberating constraints of religious commitment. His request to be considered representative of those with 'no established status whatsoever' rather than as 'a figure representing any institution' is somewhat anomalous (Merton's identity and the fact that we continue to read him are based, on the one hand, on his representative role and, on the other, on his availability as a best-selling author) but speaks to others who know that their identity is not dependent upon status or role. He continues to speak to those who feel drawn by 'something that the deepest ground of our being cries out for [...] for which a lifetime of striving would not be enough'.¹¹⁹ In this, he had intention. He had particular types of hearer or reader in mind; readers who share worldview and commitments. Sometimes he was writing for the 'rare person here and there' who may 'come alive and be awake at a moment when wakefulness is desirable'.¹²⁰ In one sense, then, he did not write for a general public, though his writings were generally available. When asked by an enquirer in 1964 about how a Catholic writer can influence his public, Merton first wanted to distinguish between the writer's public, the publisher's public and the reviewer's public:

There is a public that reads the blurb on the jacket and then, if it reads the book at all, sees it only in the light of the blurb – or the review which copied the blurb. If that is the public one is to 'influence' then what matters is to have good blurbs and lots of

¹¹⁸ *Asian Journal*, p. 305.

¹¹⁹ *Asian Journal*, pp. 312-13.

¹²⁰ *Raids*, pp. 2-3.

advertising and bang-up reviews, and if possible a pretty good and original image of the writer himself. This, of course, is a waste of time and an indignity, and is not worthy of consideration in a serious man's mind.¹²¹

For 'the people who really need to read him', however, the writer's influence depends on having something important to say not only for his own time but into the future; something which, if it matters, will be opposed. For this reason, 'the writer who wants to – let us say reach, or help rather than influence people – must suffer for the truth of his witness and for love of the people he is reaching'.¹²² Communicative writing is both witness and love. If it is not, then the writer's communion with readers 'is shallow and without life. The real writer lives in deep communion with his readers, because they share in common sufferings and desires and needs that are urgent'.¹²³

Which is not to say that Merton was never argumentative, opinionated, petty, self-protective, even manipulative. His journals demonstrate these traits too; but the fact that the author made no obvious attempt to hide such tendencies, and typically goes on to scrutinize and critique them, makes for a different kind of communicating than, say, argumentative or assertive forms of political, academic or ecclesial engagement which Merton eschewed when he opted for one form of social organization over another. When he seems to invite readers into an interpersonal type of engagement, in which the relational potential of his communicating takes precedence over any conceptual content, he does so in the conviction that 'if we love our own ideology and our own opinion instead of loving our brother, we will seek only to glorify our ideas and our institutions and by that fact we will

¹²¹ From a letter to Lorraine, April 17, 1964 in *Witness*, p. 167. Further quotations in this paragraph are from the same letter and page.

¹²² Merton to Lorraine, in *Witness*, p. 167.

¹²³ Merton to Lorraine, in *Witness*, p. 167.

make real communication impossible'.¹²⁴ At best, interpersonal love takes precedence over love of ideas. Communicating is for the establishing and maintaining of relationship more than for argument, imposition or even persuasion.

If Merton thought he had 'given up the world to choose this life of solitude, desiring to be hidden and unseen, to be dead as it were to the world and buried with Christ in his tomb',¹²⁵ then the impulse was tempered by a yearning to communicate, such that he in some sense became more visible than many of us ever do – but, at best, precisely as that poured-out priestly presence. The sacerdotal aspect is lost when disproportionate attention to the author or a unidimensional approach to his products displaces the type of empathetic, interactive and transformative response which seems to be what this body of work repeatedly calls for.

5.2.2 A Comment on Connaturality

Merton can guide our reception of his work in several ways, not least of which is his own engagement with literature. More specifically, his translating into English is particularly illuminating. Malgorzata Poks, in her study of Merton's consonance with Latin American writers, describes what it is that made him such an effective translator:

he did not merely read literature; he *meditated* on it until the deep truths contained in it became part of him, *connatural* with him – a term the followers of Jacques Maritain applied to the experience of knowledge by identification, in art as much as in religion. Referring to the traditional definition of meditation as *inquisition veritatis*, or the search

¹²⁴ 'Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman' in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 145-164 (p. 163). Merton is by no means dismissing the importance of ideas, but here commenting on how and with what intention they are communicated. In *The Behaviour of Titans* (pp. 51-52) he writes: 'I am still able to hope that a civil exchange of ideas can take place between two persons – not yet all hermetically sealed, each one in the collective arrogance and despair of his own herd.... we are still sufficiently "persons" to realize we have a common difficulty... I write in the hope that we can still save ourselves from becoming numbers.'

¹²⁵ *Aelred of Rievaulx, vol 1: Treatises, Pastoral Prayer* ed. by M Basil Pennington (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. 62.

for truth, he would repeatedly stress that it is not solely the function of intelligence, since meditation originates in love and leads to an affective identification with and a unitive knowing of ultimate reality.¹²⁶

Poks describes how Merton could enter into and ingest deep truths carried by literature, understanding them affectively as well as intellectually through a process of identification, of 'knowing with' the producer of the text. This way of meditating, by contrast with its philosophical form, is a full-bodied engagement which, for the Christian, is 'a personal and intimate form of prayer' which 'should integrate the mystery of one's own life with the mysteries of the Christian faith'.¹²⁷ As for Merton, so for readers who enter into his work with empathy and imagination as well as speculative and critical faculties.

Merton questioned the adequacy of the notion of connaturality for explaining the fullness of the kind of 'knowledge-by-identity' which loving relationship permits. Love 'is able to bridge the gap between subject and object and *commune in the subjectivity of the one loved*'.¹²⁸ More can be known through the actuality of loving relationship than can be known even through imaginative entry into and integration of the words and ideas of a beloved other. So, writes Poks, the 'last decade of his life was actively dedicated to the building of mutual understanding between individuals as well as whole nations, races, and ethnic and religious groups',¹²⁹ within which his work of translation was 'a means of enhancing this understanding and of emphasizing that which binds people across largely

¹²⁶ Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Katowice, Poland: Wyzsza Szkola Zarzadzania Marketingowego, 2007), p. 21

¹²⁷ Poks, p. 21, citing Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1960), p. 88.

¹²⁸ 'The Power and Meaning of Love' in Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960), pp.97-126 (p. 103).

¹²⁹ *Consonance*, pp. 20-21.

imaginary divides.¹³⁰ The actual relationships – such as Merton’s friendship with Urtecho, mentioned above – were paramount. Poks quotes Robert Daggy as writing that ‘Merton did not, as he did in other areas of interest, write *about* Latin America but *to* and *for* Latin Americans’.¹³¹ And *with* Latin Americans.

Even the creation of art emerging from empathetic immersion in the work of another seems to fall short of the intersubjectivity to which Merton alludes. Unless, that is, the emergent art is a more wholehearted, full-bodied performance, the living of what is discovered and imbibed. Somewhere along the line, there is a way of communicating which fosters actual relationship which, however falteringly, manifests communion. The poet may allow an ‘insight into the complexities of our moral existence’ by ‘recreating another’s experience in our self’ but this is only a part of the process implied by Merton’s overarching monastic response to critical social conditions.¹³² Beyond the poetic, beyond what occurs between a reader and text, there is interpersonal relationality. Beyond the verbal work, including meditation, is the kind of interactivity through which communion is made manifest. Transposing this understanding to readings of Merton, we might read and speak of Merton in ways which interweave his lived reality and our own, allowing our meditations

¹³⁰ *Consonance*, p. 21, referring to Merton’s letter to Clayton Eshleman, June 1963, in *Courage*, pp. 254-55 (p. 255).

¹³¹ *Consonance*, p. 13, citing Robert E. Daggy, ‘A Man of the Whole Hemisphere: Thomas Merton and Latin America’ in *American Benedictine Review* 42.2 (1991), p. 124.

¹³² In another essay, Poks (‘Thomas Merton’s Poetry of Endless Inscription: A Tale of Liberation and Expanding Horizons’ in *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001), pp. 184-222) makes clear that Merton’s later style and re-engagement with literary criticism was more than a return to pre-monastic interests. He had spiralled onto another level because of his ‘sapiential experience’ which energized both a ‘mystical search for reality that transcends (liturgical) form’ and a parallel ‘poetic quest for a new form, or non-form, to express what cannot be inscribed within communicable linguistic formats’. So the ‘new poetics of Cables to the Ace’ makes new demands on the reader, calling for ‘a radical restructuring of reading strategies, which the anti-prologue makes quite plain’ (pp. 215-16).

to integrate the mystery of our lives with the mysteries of the Christian faith, in ways which modify actual lived relationships, themselves a form of new creation:

a translation, no matter how faithful to the original, will always be 'a new creation' in so far as the translator, a unique individual with a unique perspective, first has to enter into another person's experience so deeply as to make it his own ('connatural' with him), and then, re-emerging from this 'communion in silence,' has to transliterate this experience in his own idiom. Far from detracting from faithfulness to the original poem, the newness Merton speaks of is a necessary condition if a translation is to be alive.¹³³

Attentive reading, and the pre-verbal work which fosters humility in that reading, can facilitate training in receptivity which ultimately flourishes in encounter with otherness (including the non-human other) as gift unavailable to manipulation or possession. Merton's writing was sent out to work on and work with readers in a prophetic task with profoundly political implications. Formed and informed by daily immersion in the psalms, Merton continually sought to develop a poetic form 'charged with meaning in a far different way than are the words in a piece of scientific prose',¹³⁴ which might produce in the reader 'an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit' in a manner which awakens hospitality to God, which is also hospitality to the stranger:

No one considered that the children of the Sun might, after all, hold in their hearts a spiritual secret. On the contrary, abstract discussions were engaged in to determine whether, in terms of academic philosophy, the Indian was to be considered a rational animal. One shudders at the voice of cerebral Western arrogance even then eviscerated by the rationalism that is ours today, judging the living spiritual mystery of primitive man and condemning it to exclusion from the category on which love, friendship, respect, and communion were made to depend. | God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*.¹³⁵

Were he not a monk, Merton would not communicate with present-day readers in the way he does, however skilled and empathetic a poet-writer he might be. As the monk he also

¹³³ *Consonance*, p. 22.

¹³⁴ *Bread in the Wilderness* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1976), p. 45. The next quotation is from the same page.

¹³⁵ 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 372-391 (p. 384).

brings to mind the stranger, identifies as the stranger (See 3.2.2), addressing non-monastic readers from a contrary social location, however inadequately he or the community may have performed a prophetically-infused counter-melody. By the fact of his faith-motivated estrangement from a type of social location in which many of us read him, in which he became more fully present through the regular delivery of literary representations and fruits of that life, he can hold readers in view of the strangeness of a biblical, eschatological landscape, and with heightened attention to the non-threatening alterity of the other person connected (in ways obscured by dominating public narratives) with the more real person we also are. The point is developed in the next section which concludes this chapter by interpreting Merton's communicative practices as acts of love.

5.3 When Communicating is Loving

If Merton's communicative writing was monastic practice, and monasticism was conceived of as a learning to love and expression of love, then his publishing, corresponding and making available other extant writings can reasonably be read as acts of love. But how?

In his overview of Merton on the theme of love, O'Connell in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* recalls a decisive retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani during Holy Week 1941, during which Merton immersed himself in 'what is perhaps the most characteristic work of the most significant figure in Cistercian history, the *De Diligendo Deo (On Loving God)* of St. Bernard of Clairvaux'.¹³⁶ Merton's relationship with the Trappists began with exposure to, and appreciation of, the teaching on love at the heart of Cistercian tradition, such that 'his own reflections on love, as rich and varied as they are throughout his life, are deeply

¹³⁶ *Encyclopedia*, p. 268. The article on 'Love' is at pp. 268-71.

grounded in his Cistercian heritage'.¹³⁷ Taking as a starting point the conviction that we are created to love God without measure and for God's own sake,¹³⁸ Bernard mapped a pathway through self-oriented love, love of others and of God for one's own sake, to love of God and self for God's sake, through the crucified Christ who alone signifies and activates a 'disinterested love, in which all creation and even the self is loved for God's sake alone'.¹³⁹ Monastic life was designed as a schooling in love of God alone, which is also a love of others for God's sake.¹⁴⁰ Aware that 'medieval talk about love solves nothing',¹⁴¹ Merton drew on the vocabularies of personalist and Marxist thinkers, amongst others, in order to communicate classical Christian interpretations of love, its corruption and its restoration. 'Participation in the paschal mystery is the restoration of the power to love rightly. It is the recovery of one's authentic self'.¹⁴² It is also a 'sign of contradiction to injustice and an invitation to conversion', for Christianity is no retreat into idealism or quietude 'by abstracting [...] from material things'; it is a learning how to give oneself 'in a service of love'.¹⁴³ If love is the intended purpose and foundation of Merton's communicative monasticism (the monastic community being a 'school of charity'), and monastic life is all of life, then his practices of writing for publishing and circulating are rightly interpreted as, at best, acts of love.

¹³⁷ *Encyclopedia*, p. 268.

¹³⁸ See *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* trans. by G. R. Evans (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987), p. 174.

¹³⁹ *Encyclopedia*, p. 269. O'Connell (citing the *Asian Journal*, pp. 333-34) also points out that on his final day Merton was referring to the teaching of Cistercian abbot Adam of Perseigne on the purpose of monastic life as transforming 'cupiditas into caritas.... self-centered love into an outgoing, other-centered love' through participation in Christ's resurrection life.

¹⁴⁰ See Merton's fiftieth birthday reflections in *Dancing*, p. 200, cited above.

¹⁴¹ *Search*, p. 150, cited in *Encyclopedia*, p. 270.

¹⁴² *Encyclopedia*, p. 270.

¹⁴³ *Encyclopedia*, p. 271, citing 'Christian Humanism' in *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 135-150 (p. 150).

It is perhaps too rarely that theological writers interrogate or describe (as Merton did) motives for writing and publishing. If communicative writing is indeed a form of loving action, then we might begin with Merton's conviction that the 'reality of love is determined by the relationship itself which it establishes'.¹⁴⁴ The type of relationship established with ourselves as future readers might be taken as indicative of a loving intention, which resonates with the notion of communion-oriented communication described in the essay on symbolism. Merton channels St. Bernard when he associates true love with 'three fundamentally human strivings: with *creative work*, with *sacrifice*, and with *contemplation*'.¹⁴⁵ Love is reliably evidenced by these three, and chiefly by sacrifice.¹⁴⁶ Creative work can be seen, contemplation can be deduced, and the sacrifice of which Merton writes is a capacity and willingness to be transformed such that one sees as the other person sees, loves what the other loves, experiences the deeper realities of the other's life as if one's own. A relationship of love, in Merton's terms, is 'a relationship of a subject to a subject'; meaning 'I must know how to love you *as myself*'.¹⁴⁷ Avoiding being heard as solipsistic, Merton goes on to say that the subjective quality in love 'by no means signifies that one questions the real existence of the person loved, or that one doubts the reality of the relationship established with him by love',¹⁴⁸ for if that were the case then any notion of Christian love would not in fact exist. Rather,

the subjectivity essential to love does not detract from objective reality but adds to it. Love brings us into a relationship with an objectively existing reality, but because it is

¹⁴⁴ Merton, 'The Power and Meaning of Love' in *Disputed Questions*, pp. 97-126 (p. 102). He continues: 'if I love you, I must love you as a person and not as a thing. And in that case my relationship to you is not merely the relationship of a subject to an object, but it is analogous to my relationship to myself' (p. 103).

¹⁴⁵ *Disputed Questions*, p.100 (his italics).

¹⁴⁶ In his journal entry for 1 September 1949 (in *Jonas*, p. 229) Merton wrote: 'to put myself down on paper [...] with the most complete simplicity and integrity [...] It is a kind of crucifixion. [...] losing myself entirely by becoming public property just as Jesus is public property in the Mass'. See (1.5) above.

¹⁴⁷ *Disputed Questions*, p. 103 (his italics). The next quotation is from the same page.

¹⁴⁸ *Disputed Questions*, p. 103.

love it is able to bridge the gap between subject and object and *commune in the subjectivity of the one loved*. Only love can effect this kind of union and give this kind of knowledge-by-identity with the beloved.¹⁴⁹

This love is the outworking of a sapiential awareness which ‘deepens our communion with the concrete: It is not an initiation into a world of abstractions and ideals’.¹⁵⁰ The beloved remains autonomous, and love for the other is for their good, not the good of the lover. A ‘fully human existence’, characterized by capacity to commune in the subjectivity of the other, echoes a divine love whose conception as subject-object relationship is ‘utterly out of the question’.¹⁵¹ When Merton includes sacrifice as an indicator of the presence of authentic love, he is thinking of a willingness and capability to undergo translation into the perspective of the other: ‘Without sacrifice, such a transformation is utterly impossible’, he writes. ‘But unless we are capable of this kind of transformation “into the other” while remaining ourselves, we are not yet capable of a fully human existence’.¹⁵² It is conceivable, then, that Merton’s publishing into the future is, in his own terms, an act of love towards unknown readers whose perspectives and life experiences he works to imagine, those who ‘share in common sufferings and desires and needs that are urgent’.¹⁵³ Even a ‘last despairing childish effort at love for some unknown people in some unknown future’ (as he wrote in his journal for 2 October 1967) is still an act of love.¹⁵⁴

In this essay Merton does not in fact say whether the beloved must be an actually known person, with whom the lover has an existing or potential relationship. Subjectivity implies particularity, and the potential for imaginative transformation into the other is

¹⁴⁹ *Disputed Questions*, p. 103.

¹⁵⁰ Merton, ‘“Baptism in the Forest”: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner’ in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 92-116 (p. 100).

¹⁵¹ *Disputed Questions*, p. 104.

¹⁵² *Disputed Questions*, p. 104.

¹⁵³ Letter to Lorraine, 17 April 1964, in *Witness*, p. 167.

¹⁵⁴ *Learning to Love*, p. 297.

largely dependent on knowledge of the other's experience of the world. This is not a matter of will or intention (I may, for example, desire to enter imaginatively into the lives of others, only to be confronted by my limited understanding), but of potential realization. There are limits, then, to the capacity of an author to extend love to unknown readers. What Merton has achieved, however, is the appearance of doing so, by writing in such a way that readers can sense that they are either being directly addressed, or that Merton is voicing their deepest feelings and perceptions, even those the reader had struggled to identify or articulate. The actually present other will always take priority, but Merton bequeaths a legacy which can bear upon those actual interpersonal perceptions and interactions.

If we turn his writing back on himself, the potential for readers to enter imaginatively into the otherness of Merton is exceptionally high. The seemingly endless inscription of his lived reality serves as a type of 'school of charity', if quite unlike any experience of a Trappist monastery. Putting this in concrete and personal terms, Merton cannot love me as a particular person in the way he describes, though I can retrospectively love him in the way he describes (and as he spoke, for example, of Emily Dickinson), even though there is no potential for the mutuality implicit in interpersonal relationship. What I am relating to affectively is an imagined reconstruction; but it is Merton's writing into the future which established conditions for a version of the imaginative interpersonal transformation he associates with a fully human existence. For that very reason we might acknowledge the writing to be an act of love. It is reasonable to conclude at least that what he intended towards future readers does not contradict what he intended towards readers during his lifetime.

What we receive from Merton are communiqués born of attempts ‘to come to terms *in silence*’ with what he calls an ‘inner self’ with its recurrent attempts to ‘go out to meet others, not just with a mask of affability, but with real commitment and authentic love’¹⁵⁵ in the midst of ‘voices, music, traffic, or the generalized noise’ which keeps us immersed in ‘a flood of rackets and words, a diffuse medium in which our consciousness is half diluted’.¹⁵⁶ For this reason if no other, his learning of love depended on contemplation, creativity and the intentional separation which allows for immersive attention to what he called ‘inner experience’, to properly imagined others, and to biblical, eschatological counter-narratives. In this manner, Merton presents us with a formidable model of theological practice.¹⁵⁷ To write of imagined interactions or an imagined author is not to denigrate the actuality of communication across time and beyond death, but takes seriously the fact of an unreachable ‘silent self’ within each person, ‘whose presence is disturbing precisely because it is so silent: it *can’t* be spoken. It has to remain silent. To articulate it, to verbalize it, is to tamper with it, and in some ways to destroy it.’¹⁵⁸ The persona we may conjure from literature is an extension (or avatar) of the eternally silent author whose loving intentions we can, in the end, only choose to trust.

For Merton as for any of us, acts of love towards actual persons are qualitatively different from ideas about or generalized feelings of love. This is the basis of my critique (in

¹⁵⁵ Merton, ‘Creative Silence’ in *Love and Living*, pp. 38-45 (p. 41).

¹⁵⁶ *Love and Living*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, Mark McIntosh, *Divine Teaching* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 24: ‘It is not so much thinking *about* theological topics that really constitutes theology; for distinguishable from that is the *means by which* the theological mind reflects. And a truly theological mind [...] is a mind that has begun to be shaped and attuned to God’s way of thinking and loving. The work of theology certainly includes reflection on all the things that Christians believe God has been doing. But this reflection has, itself, to spring from a continual conversion, a continual sharing in this hearing of the living voice of the author of life. Otherwise, theologians will keep thinking like characters in a play who refuse to understand that they are characters in a play, and who for that reason cannot experience anything of the larger and infinitely beautiful vision of their author.’

¹⁵⁸ ‘Creative Silence’ in *Love and Living*, pp. 38-45 (p. 40).

the next chapter) of an over-emphasis on Merton's recreation of an affective episode in Louisville in 1958. He made the point about generalized notions of love in an empathetic reading of Chuang Tzu's challenge to the 'abstract theory of "universal love" preached by Mo Ti', on the grounds that the implications are inhuman:

In theory, Mo Ti held that all men should be loved with an equal love [...] But this universal love will be found, upon examination [...] to make such severe demands upon human nature that it cannot be realized. [...] Not because love is not good and natural to man, but because a system constructed on a theoretical and abstract principle of love ignores certain fundamental and mysterious realities.¹⁵⁹

My Argument with the Gestapo bears witness to Merton's longstanding mistrust of theoretical formulations which disregard or over-ride the particularity of a human person or of personal experience.¹⁶⁰ The actuality, the detail of loving, interpersonal exchange, cannot ultimately be conditioned by a universalizing system of thought. Universal love is not a human capacity or attribute, but a divine one.¹⁶¹ The degrees of love mapped by St. Bernard, for instance, do not conclude with a universal perspective as a quality or capacity of the agent, but with a transfigured particularity better described as surrendered autonomy.¹⁶² If love can commune in the subjectivity of the one loved, then the beloved always has particular subjectivity, even if only imagined.

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 22.

¹⁶⁰ In a late essay Merton writes, for instance, 'I have a profound mistrust of all obligatory answers. The great problem of our time is not to formulate clear answers to neat theoretical questions but to tackle the self-destructive alienation of man in a society dedicated in theory to human values and in practice to the pursuit of power for its own sake' ('Is the World a Problem?' in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1971), pp. 143-156 (p. 153).

¹⁶¹ 'Thus I am sure we all agree that it is not for us to spell out proofs for the existence of God, but merely to bear witness in our simplicity to His universal love for all men and His message of salvation, but above all to His presence in the hearts of all men, including sinners, including those who hate Him.' (Merton to Dom Francis Decroix, 22 August 1967, in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), pp. 158-59 (p. 158).

¹⁶² This was the conclusion of my previous MPhil study. The point does not contradict the notion that, as Poks puts it, 'the Trappist monk was convinced that the personal revealed transcendent reality and that through the unique and the specific the mind was capable of grasping the universal' ('Thomas Merton's Poetry

5.3.1 The Hard Edge of Compassion and the Disruptive Activity of Love

Notwithstanding a deep-rooted Romanticism, Merton was quick to challenge sentimental and ineffectual notions of love. In a core essay republished as part of *Faith and Violence*, for example, he unfurled the political implications of a theology of love which ‘cannot afford to preach edifying generalities about charity, while identifying “peace” with mere established power and legalized violence against the oppressed’.¹⁶³ Love is also resistance, dealing ‘realistically with the evil and injustice in the world’ and challenging ‘the specious myth of a “realism” that merely justifies force in the service of established power’.¹⁶⁴ A theology of love is no less than ‘a theology of *resistance*, a refusal of the evil that reduces a brother to homicidal desperation’ and may indeed ‘turn out to be a theology of revolution’ consisting in ‘the wisdom of the serpent which is seldom acquired in Sunday school’.¹⁶⁵ An explicitly Christian resistance will endeavour to emphasize ‘reason and humane communication rather than force, but [...] also admits the possibility of force in a limit-situation when everything else fails’.¹⁶⁶ What matters is the refusal ‘to submit to a force [...] recognized as anti-human and utterly destructive’.¹⁶⁷

Refusal to submit assumes a capacity to recognize dehumanizing, destructive forces, then a notion of what must actually be done in order to enact that refusal. Rather than leaving us with speculation or programme, Merton offers extended testimony to a decision

of Endless Inscription’ in *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001), pp. 184-222 (p.190). Neither is it contrary to the notion that the ‘distinctive Christian way is to find the grace of selfless, compassionate existence by attention to and identification with the unique and unrepeatable *total* instance of it within the net of *dharma*’ (Williams, ‘A Person that Nobody Knows’ in *Silent Action*, pp. 17-19 (p. 18)).

¹⁶³ *Faith and Violence*, p. 8.

¹⁶⁴ *Faith and Violence*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁵ *Faith and Violence*, p. 9 for all quotes in this sentence.

¹⁶⁶ *Faith and Violence*, p. 9.

¹⁶⁷ *Faith and Violence*, p. 12.

and direction which serves as counterpoint for present-day readers in an endless variety of reading sites. Not only does he offer no programme for collective action; he offers no programme for the seeing (or hearing) either. Merton did not, for instance, produce books on how to meditate, or indeed reveal much detail about his own religious practices – other than writing.¹⁶⁸ The writing is rarely in the form of instruction. Where it is, Merton is bringing before readers his own readings of aspects of tradition which may be unknown or overlooked, monastic and mystical sources along with modern writers he experiences as resonating with those traditions. We read at a distance from his inhabiting and performing those sources, yet a distance which is bridged by the kind of time-delayed relationship Merton extends to future readers. Through the seemingly inter-personal bond, he sustains a tension between worldviews, and thus goes some way towards predisposing readers for the kind of encounter he describes in relation to the Bible, the modern reader of which ‘is plunged into a field of conscious and unconscious tensions even before he opens the book.’¹⁶⁹ By exposing his own discovering of how the ‘prophetic and eschatological qualities of the experience’ of biblical authors ‘are grounded in history and ordinary life’,¹⁷⁰ Merton in his biblically-saturated Trappist world potentially mediates between readers and the strangeness of that biblical landscape, or at least encourages readers to remain vulnerable to a word of God ultimately ‘recognized by its transforming and liberating power. The “word of God” is recognized in actual experience because it does something to anyone who really “hears” it: it transforms his entire existence.’¹⁷¹ It is this word of God which ultimately

¹⁶⁸ There are descriptions and examples of contemplation and meditation throughout his work, and numerous pointers (such as *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956) or *What is Contemplation?* (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1950), but nothing approximating to the kind of guide now widely available. Perhaps the closest we have to a description of Merton’s method of meditation is, from the late, hermitage period, his letter of 2 January 1966 to Abdul Aziz (*Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 62-64).

¹⁶⁹ Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 16.

¹⁷⁰ *Opening*, p. 17.

¹⁷¹ *Opening*, p. 18.

informs any resistance characteristic of a theology of love, a resistance to self-protective and inadequate systems of thought which cannot themselves ultimately resist the inbreaking word which comes as 'a flood which breaks the dam', even within the monastic community:

One senses this in our community to some extent. Uneasiness, anguish, dis-ease, because something is building up to break the dam and this 'word' is inscrutably different from the comforting platitudes of Superiors. But this sense pervades all society – is resisted by those who erect *their word* in to a dam and are determined to 'hold' it at any price.¹⁷²

In a style reserved for the private journals, expressing feelings rather than writing about feelings, Merton had been railing against 'illusory' changes in the monastery, which barely addressed a structural crisis reflected in his relationship with Abbot Dom James, who here represents 'the arrogance of nice, self-satisfied rich people who have everything and imagine they are kind and good because they are pleased with themselves'.¹⁷³ He correlated this personality trait with 'the God-image subtly imposed by Dom James', an image contrasting starkly with his intuition of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who 'reveals himself to "the people" as *their* God, God "for them"'.¹⁷⁴ The resistance Merton describes as an aspect of an adequate theology of love is precisely the converse of what he here describes as resistance to the word revealing Godself.

The journal continues into reflections on William Faulkner's *The Bear* which Merton describes as 'a mind-changing and transforming myth that makes you stop to think about re-evaluating everything'.¹⁷⁵ He generalized the experience: 'All great writing like this makes

¹⁷² *Learning to Love*, p. 165 (journal entry for 27 November 1966).

¹⁷³ *Learning to Love*, p. 164.

¹⁷⁴ *Learning to Love*, p. 164 for both quotations in this sentence.

¹⁷⁵ *Learning to Love*, p.165.

you break through the futility and routine of ordinary life and see the greatness of existence, its seriousness, and the awfulness of wasting it'.¹⁷⁶ Another image of breakthrough, this is to some extent typical of Merton's descriptions of epiphanic moments, and in this instance a clear statement of the place of 'great writing' in the process. It contrasts with reference to the word of God as a flood crashing against words erected as defensive walls (which in turn contrasts with Merton's work on Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*, in which the flood is only threatening and destructive), but there is an underlying commonality in the notion that attentive reception of words can be creatively disruptive and reorienting.¹⁷⁷ Dams are built for containment and for harnessing of energy. Their construction can also cause harm and unanticipated consequences. The irruptive, effusive divine word is 'resisted by those who erect *their word* in to a dam', privileging (by intention or otherwise) particular social structures, patterns and relationships in a manner Merton interpreted as harmful or limiting. In this instance he was writing of experience within the monastery, in light of a more intimately disruptive love for a particular young woman, but he concludes that 'this sense pervades all society'.¹⁷⁸

His expression of frustration with his abbot during a period of emotional upheaval in his own life more or less coincided with Merton's producing the symbolism essay, in which he contrasted the relational mode by which symbolism communicates, with the functional mode prevalent in technologized cultures. In both instances, Merton was comparing modes of communication, and in both instances critiquing ways in which structures of thought interfere with possible reception of fresh insight. As a Catholic monk, Merton could hardly

¹⁷⁶ *Learning to Love*, p. 165.

¹⁷⁷ Some of this paragraph is a reworking of part of my 'A Flood Which Breaks the Dam: Seeking Advent Reflections in Merton's Private Journals' in *The Merton Journal* 20.2 (2013), pp. 3-10.

¹⁷⁸ *Learning to Love*, p. 165.

be described as averse to organizational structure and thinking. The issue was more about relationship to or dependence upon those structures, and a capacity to recognize when their purpose is superseded by the demands of love, solidarity, communion. So, in *Conjectures*, Merton acknowledges an obvious need for 'durable institutions' and the kind of organization he himself had been dependent upon since childhood, but asserts that 'a small, apparently insignificant and disorganized circle of friends united by love and a common venture in Christian witness may be of far greater value to the Church than an apparently thriving organization' driven by wilfulness.¹⁷⁹

He repeatedly made similar points, both about the centrality of networks of friendship and love, and about the transient or subsidiary nature of organizational structures. He picked up the latter theme during his last ever public appearance when recounting the dilemma of a Tibetan monk (Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche) asking an abbot friend for advice when facing the prospect of needing to flee the country. Merton reports that the abbot replied: 'From now on, Brother, everybody stands on his own feet.'¹⁸⁰ In his commentary to the gathered monks and nuns in Bangkok, Merton continued:

If you forget everything else that has been said, I would suggest you remember this for the future: 'From now on, everybody stands on his own feet.' This, I think, is what Buddhism is about, what Christianity is about, what monasticism is about—if you understand it in terms of grace. It is not a Pelagian statement, by any means, but a

¹⁷⁹ *Conjectures*, pp. 307-8. He goes on to say (influenced by his reading of Bonhoeffer) that: 'especially in the field of Ecumenism this dimension of friendship, spontaneity, and spiritual liberty is of the greatest importance, and too much emphasis on organization can be stupefying' (*Conjectures*, p. 308). This is also about the quality of presence to one another. In a talk on 4 December 1967, Merton said: 'Community is presence, not institution, see. What we've been banging on is the ability to substitute institution for real presence. Take the question, for example, of silence [...] This is a great source of problems, and also a great source of graces. But when it gets to be formalized to a certain point it ceases to be a source of grace and becomes a source of problems. Because it is not any longer helping presence'. See the transcript at Appendix 3.

¹⁸⁰ *Asian Journal*, p. 338.

statement to the effect that we can no longer rely on being supported by structures that may be destroyed at any moment by a political power or a political force.¹⁸¹

The risk is that we hear Merton affirming individualism, until we note what he said in the same address about the distorting effect of a consciousness which interprets ‘in ways that are prejudiced and predetermined to fit a certain wrong picture of the world, in which [the person] exists as an individual ego in the center of things. This is called by Buddhism avidya, or ignorance’.¹⁸² Ross Labrie in his 2001 work concluded that Merton’s apparent individualism was essentially anarchist, in the tradition of the likes of Dorothy Day,¹⁸³ and that his becoming a hermit in the mid-1960s ‘connected him psychologically and spiritually with the ancient Desert Fathers of Egypt and Syria who were, ecclesiastically speaking, the countercultural revolutionaries of their day’ and ‘highly individualized’.¹⁸⁴ The Bangkok talk is better heard, then, as an expression of Merton’s reading of what was called for when monasticism had become so institutionalized that it was time ‘for monks to become antimonks’.¹⁸⁵ This is Labrie’s term, and the oppositional language may inadvertently imply a kind of dualism Merton did not intend, or suggest that he was in some way reneging upon his monastic commitment. He was well aware that ecclesial and monastic institutions, like other structures, can become manifestations of a ‘superficial inadequate communal spirit’.¹⁸⁶ By contrast with other organizations, however, what might be properly expected

¹⁸¹ *Asian Journal*, p. 338.

¹⁸² *Asian Journal*, p. 332.

¹⁸³ Labrie, *Inclusive*, p. 207.

¹⁸⁴ Labrie, *Inclusive*, p. 208. By way of example, Merton writes in the preface to *Disputed Questions*: ‘I cannot be content with the idea that a contemplative monk is one who takes flight from the wicked world and turns his back on it completely in order to lose himself in antiquarian ritualism, or worse still, to delve introspectively into his own psyche. I admit that this illusion exists and is dangerous – and that the monks themselves are largely responsible for creating it. [...] The vocation of man is to live freely and spiritually as a son of God in and through Christ, and, moved by the Spirit of Christ, to work for the establishment of that ‘Kingdom of God’ which is the unity of all men in peace, creativity and love. [...] I do not believe that this Kingdom can ever be the work either of individualists or of mass-men’ (p. xii, dated June 1960).

¹⁸⁵ Labrie, *Inclusive*, p. 208.

¹⁸⁶ Labrie, *Inclusive*, p. 208, citing Merton’s journal entry of 17 July, 1965 (*Dancing*, p. 270).

of a 'school of charity' is continuous emphasis on learning to love. 'Once we love, our love can change our thinking. But wrong thinking can inhibit love'.¹⁸⁷ If Merton's writing was monastic practice, and monastic practice was, as root, formation in and expression of love, then his writing included resistance to the perpetuation of ideas, ways of thinking and communicative strategies which undermine or resist love itself.

In Tibet, on the day after his second audience with the Dalai Lama, Merton took notes from T.R.V. Murti's account of the Madhyamika system of Buddhist philosophy, which was influencing his thinking during the visit. Grappling with Murti's work, Merton concluded that 'Madhyamika shows the opponent the absurdity of his position "on principles and arguments accepted by him"'.¹⁸⁸ If the response is not accepted, argument is nevertheless at an end, for the 'purpose of Madhyamika is not to convince, but to explode the argument itself' as an act of compassion.¹⁸⁹ The argument is exploded, as a dam might be burst. The purpose is compassion, a form of love. It intends a kind of awakening.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter began with a close reading of Merton's late essay on symbolism, in which he contrasts modes and styles of communication, highlighting a type of communication which fosters and tends towards communion. I take the essay as a guide to understanding how Merton might, in later years, have thought about communicating with ourselves as future

¹⁸⁷ Merton, 'Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?' in *Love and Living*, ed. By Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (London: Sheldon Press, 1979), pp. 25-37 (p. 36).

¹⁸⁸ *Other Side*, p. 262 (7 November 1968). See *Asian Journal*, p. 118.

¹⁸⁹ *Other Side*, p. 262. Merton was citing T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, 1960), pp. 145-46. On 4 November 1968, Merton wrote of the dialectic which contrasts with the relational dialectic I am attempting to identify, and with the poetics elaborated in Merton's classes on Rilke: 'Murti on Madhyamika: "Its dialectic is of crucial importance. This dialectic is the consciousness of the total and interminable conflict in reason and the consequent attempt to resolve the conflict by rising to a higher standpoint" [Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, p. 126]' (*Other Side*, p. 252). I am suggesting that Merton takes us toward a point of abiding with rational conflicts which remain unresolved.

readers. Setting the essay in the context of its production, I have drawn upon letters and personal journals from the period to enhance understanding and illustrate what Merton was saying about communicating and communion, and the ways in which his own monastic communicating extended and actualized a prophetic witness in the face of divisive, distracting or sterile forms of communication.

This public, prophetic work began in earnest when *The Seven Storey Mountain* delivered a counter-narrative into the midst of a Cold War America and beyond in 1948. Evelyn Waugh's introduction to the British edition of the story (whatever we make of his rhetorical flourish or reading of history) illuminates something of how the book's socio-political significance was being interpreted:

In the natural order the modern world is rapidly being made uninhabitable by the scientists and politicians. We are back in the age of Gregory, Augustine and Boniface, and in compensation the Devil is being disarmed of many of his former enchantments. Power is all he can offer now; the temptations of wealth and elegance no longer assail us. As in the Dark Ages the cloister offers the sanest and most civilized way of life. And in the supernatural order the times require more than a tepid and dutiful piety.¹⁹⁰

The content, style and mode of Merton's communicating evolved but, being monastic practices, his writing for publishing, as well as his correspondence and preparations for future access to unpublished material, were works of assiduously Christian love. Received as such, they have the capacity to go on nurturing, challenging and modifying perspectives, relationships and practices amongst readers already sensitized to dehumanizing trends and forces, and receptive of the kind of eschatological counter-narrative represented by

¹⁹⁰ Evelyn Waugh, Foreword in Thomas Merton, *Elected Silence* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949), pp. v-vi (p. vi), January 1949. The relationship between Merton and Waugh is told through their letters in Mary Frances Coady, ed. and intro. *Merton & Waugh: A Monk, A Crusty Old Man and 'The Seven Storey Mountain'* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2015).

Merton's definitive, chosen movement to a marginal perspective. There he remained, never to return – the significance of which I will discuss in the next, final chapter.

**CHAPTER 6: BETWEEN MERTON'S FAITH PRAXIS AND OUR OWN:
INTERTEXTUALITY, EPIPHANY AND A DISTRACTING TEXT**

Poems are nought but warmed-up breeze,
Dollars are made by Trappist Cheese.¹

Thomas Merton

As you may be aware, there have been more than the usual number of rumours recently concerning Father Merton – that he has returned ‘to the world’, that he has been seen working on the staff of a Harlem poverty project, that he has joined the Catholic Worker staff, that he has ‘disappeared to somewhere in Mexico.’ | Father Merton is in fact living, as he has for some months, in a small hermitage on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani, in the farmland of Kentucky.²

James H. Forest, 22 December 1965

My mind returns often to this – he stayed put. It was not that he hid out, or vegetated, or gave up, or joined the officers’ club, or hardened, or softened, or shrugged away his plight or ours. It meant that he had a place, a center, convictions that held, a sense of himself, wary and troubled as he was.³

Daniel Berrigan

¹ Thomas Merton, ‘CHEESE’ in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 799-800. Robert Daggy wrote: ‘In the mid-1960s Thomas Merton, responding to the growth of the cheese industry at the Abbey of Gethsemani, wrote and pinned to the monastic bulletin board a takeoff on Joyce Kilmer’s poem, “Trees”’ (‘Introduction: Beyond Cheese and Liturgy’ in *Monks Pond: Thomas Merton’s Little Magazine*, ed. and intro. by Robert E. Daggy (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), pp. ix-xv (p. ix).

² ‘Statement about Thomas Merton by James H. Forest, 22 December 1965’, from the Merton Center Digital Collections, <<https://merton.bellarmino.edu/items/show/486>> [accessed 29 June 2017].

³ Daniel Berrigan, ‘Thomas Merton’ in *Daniel Berrigan: Poetry, Drama, Prose* ed. and intro. by Michael True (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), pp. 89-94 (p. 93).

Merton entered the Trappist monastic community at Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, on 10 December 1941, and remained a monk of that community until his dying day, 10 December 1968. In a letter sent after departing on the long journey towards Bangkok, Merton responded to rumours by telling his friend and secretary, Patrick Hart, to pass on the message that he was a monk of Gethsemani and intended to remain one all his days. He looked forward to returning to Kentucky.⁴

A distinguishing and unifying feature of Merton's body of work is his being a monk. That this is sometimes overlooked, diluted, dismissed, questioned or domesticated suggests that his monasticism can be troubling. (No less challenging than the monasticism for some is the fact that Merton was and remained a Catholic priest.) The implication that he could not live an attentive and responsive Christian life – indeed, live a decent human life – without detaching from particular structures, rewards, habits, preoccupations, distractions, ways of engaging and so forth, can be felt as an affront to those of us who struggle with everyday demands, dilemmas and compromises. His movement into monastic living may be interpreted as evasion. In his own understanding, that defining shift from one socio-cultural context to another was no abdication of responsibility, but the reverse. Rather than align with prevailing socio-cultural developments, or the compulsions and insecurities underlying aggressive tribalism during a prolonged period of social crisis, Merton reasoned, prayed and felt his way towards a vocational path along which he might discern and dislodge the roots

⁴ Patrick Hart, 'Foreword' in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), pp. xxi-xxix (p. xxviii). Merton also wrote in a final circular letter to friends in September 1968 that it would be impossible for him 'to think of keeping in touch with political issues, still less to comment on them or to sign various petitions, protests, etc. Even though the need for them may be even greater: but will they by now have lost any usefulness? Has the signing of protests become a pointless exercise?' ('September 1968 Circular Letter to Friends' in *The Asian Journal*, pp. 295-296 (p. 296)).

of war and dehumanization, not only as manifest in the externalized world, but also in himself.

My concern here is not with general questions about the effect or validity of monastic separation. I have not dealt with perspectives on Merton from within monastic communities (though some are represented in the second chapter above), or the glaring fact that Merton was atypical, even a maverick monk. He is far from unique in struggling to live a life which runs counter to social trends and personal impulses perceived as destructive; few, however, have left such a luminescent trail in their wake. Through his writings, he did prompt religious vocations (many of which, by his own account, did not endure), but he does not directly urge readers to follow him into the monastery. Rather, he opens up our communication with a contrary *sitz im leben*, as readers go on discovering their own places in the world.⁵ Non-monastic readers who recognize the logic of Merton's faith-based movement as response to perceived social crisis are drawn within range of the gravitational pull of prophetic, eschatological Christian traditions, by a fellow-reader whose life choices were intended as wholehearted attention and surrender to the same. When he criticizes Church and monastery, he does so as a Catholic monk. When he challenges socio-economic habits and assumptions, he does so as one who put his body where his mouth (or typewriter) was.

The challenge inherent in Merton's monastic identity is tempered by an inviting, disarmingly candid self-presentation which has time and again given rise to what readers

⁵ There is a sense in which proper attention to the strangeness (for many of us) of Merton's monastic locus can catalyse the kind of epistemological rupture described in Nancy E. Bedford, 'To Speak of God from More Than One Place: Theological Reflections from the Experience of Migration' in Ivan Petrella, ed., *Latin American Liberation Theology: The Next Generation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), pp. 95-118 (p. 111). This is in no way to compare Merton's chosen situation with the fragile and demanding circumstances or traumatic experiences of the migrants about whom Bedford writes, but a way of describing one of his functions for readers in anticipation of enhanced openness to the actuality of others such as those migrants.

describe as intimate, quasi-interpersonal encounter. The dual effect helps sustain readers' receptivity to potentially revelatory dialectical tensions, a mode of engagement quite different from, say, the notion that the Bible is 'meant to be *superimposed* upon the world, man and history from the outside, an *added* revelation of a hidden extra meaning'⁶ which requires the reader to:

live in two worlds at the same time, one visible and the other invisible; one comprehensible and the other incomprehensible; one familiar and the other frightening and strange; one where you can be yourself and another where you must strive to be unnaturally 'good'; one which you instinctively take to be real, but which you must repudiate for the other which is truly real, though to you it seems totally superfluous.⁷

Merton's actual movement to a contrasting context establishes a dynamic quite unlike the internal bifurcation he to some extent parodies here. Biographical detail anchors theological writings in actual struggle to live an integrated faith-life with authenticity, and to deal with implications of a conviction that aspects of biblically-shaped Christian faith are simply incommensurable with certain socio-cultural attitudes, practices and structures. His writings can always be used to reinforce the kind of split he describes in *Opening the Bible*, or to perpetuate a kind of vicarious monasticism which tends towards fantasy; but at best they unveil the nature of the tensions and frictions which Bible-reading Christians might expect to encounter, then guide readers' abiding creatively with the same, rather than seeking premature resolution.⁸ Through reading Merton's accounts of how his various experiences of resolution tend to be short-lived (his moving to the monastery was a type of resolution, which presented Merton with another set of frictions and tensions), we may discover a

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 13.

⁷ *Opening the Bible*, pp. 13-14.

⁸ 'The member of the mass movement, afraid of his own isolation and his own weakness as an individual, cannot face the task of discovering within himself the spiritual power and integrity which can be called forth only by love' (Merton, 'Christianity and Totalitarianism', in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), pp. 127-48 (pp. 133-34)).

deepening of our own willingness and capacity to abide with unresolved tensions which characterize our life together, and which in their own time can yield fresh insight. The fact of his sustained monastic commitment presents sympathetic, non-monastic readers with underlying creative tension.

If allowing Merton to continue mediating a prophetic, eschatological Christian witness means acknowledging and engaging tensions represented by his monastic alterity, then readings which collapse or disregard that tension are counterproductive. For this reason, I turn in this last chapter to an interpretation of Merton which has gained currency, and which revolves around the corner of Fourth Street and Walnut Street (now Muhammad Ali Boulevard) in downtown Louisville. My purpose is to identify - in light of what I have said in previous chapters - some of the implications of repeated emphasis on a particular episode and its interpretation as pivotal. I will show how 'Fourth and Walnut' readings are sometimes based on a questionable (or at least, a highly selective) reading of available texts, how they can distort interpretation of the trajectory of Merton's life and the nature of his historical praxis, and how they can blunt the effect of literature designed to work on the reader in ways I have outlined especially in Chapters Three and Five. Then, on this latter point, I suggest that the book which first alerted readers to a 'Louisville epiphany' actually gives us other clues for engaging the Merton corpus in a manner consistent with the author's intentions and historical witness. I turn now to the book in question, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

6.1 *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: Monastic Meditation and Implicit

Dialogue

Conjectures was constructed during the transitional period of Merton's formal move away from monastic duties and community life, and was published after his taking up permanent residence at a hermitage in the grounds of Gethsemani.⁹ A year before its publication, in a letter of 30 October 1965 to Naomi Burton Stone, Merton categorized the book, unlike any of his others, under 'Essays, Notes.'¹⁰ *Conjectures* is neither a journal like *Jonas*, nor autobiographical mythology like *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Neither is it an essay collection like its near-contemporary *Raids on the Unspeakable*. It does, however, share commonalities with each of these. A notable contrast with journal-style books such as *Jonas* or the retrospective *The Secular Journal*,¹¹ published in 1959, is that passages in *Conjectures* are intentionally undated. *Conjectures* is 'a personal version of the world in the 1960s' which 'unavoidably tells something' of its author, whilst being no 'venture in self-revelation or self-discovery'.¹² These are not *confessions* of a guilty bystander. The book is constructed for a different kind of communicating. These 'personal reflections, insights, metaphors, observations, judgments on reading and events' are formed of material 'taken from

⁹ According to his journals, Merton was finally granted permission to live at the hermitage on 18 August 1965, and moved in on the Feast of St. Bernard, 20 August 1965. See *Dancing*, pp. 281-82. According to Patricia Burton's *Merton Vade Mecum* bibliographic timeline (third edition, 2009), *Conjectures* was published on 4 November 1966. The Sheldon Press second edition declares the book 'First published in the United States in 1965 by Doubleday & Company Inc.' Merton's Preface is signed off with 'Abbey of Gethsemani, November 1965'. The contract between Doubleday and Merton is dated December 2, 1965 for the book to be delivered two weeks later.

¹⁰ *Witness*, p. 149.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959). The preface to *Secular Journal* describes some of the history of the book's construction and publication, including its link with Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of Friendship House in Harlem, to whom Merton had given the manuscript as he left to join the Trappists. Merton edited the book for publication, which was (like *Jonas*) delayed due to complications with censors. Publication was intended for the financial benefit of Doherty's ministry. For more on this relationship see *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, ed. and intro. by Robert A. Wild (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).

¹² *Conjectures*, p. 5.

notebooks [...] kept since 1956'.¹³ The private journals for the period 1956 – 1965 run to about a thousand printed pages. If Merton was including working notebooks and reading notebooks, the online research index gives some indication of the wide range of themes and material that he was condensing and reimagining in order to fashion *Conjectures*, the actual index of which runs to eight double-columned pages.¹⁴

The author describes *Conjectures* as 'a confrontation of twentieth-century questions in the light of a monastic commitment which inevitably makes one something of a "bystander"'.¹⁵ It is only here that Merton explicitly equates monastic commitment with the 'bystander' perspective, saying at the same time that his monastic world is 'open to the life and experience of the greater, more troubled, and more vocal world beyond the cloister',¹⁶ a world to which he still belongs. He is in the world as 'something of a bystander'. If the preface and title of *Conjectures* have Merton owning the descriptor, it is with irony and a subtle inversion of common assumptions about intervention and resistance. Alongside the perennial criticism that monastic separation means disengagement, other currents run beneath the surface of these texts; such as Merton's being something of a bystander to the Second Vatican Council during the mid-1960s.¹⁷

¹³ *Conjectures*, p. 5.

¹⁴ See <<http://merton.org/Research/Notebooks/>> [accessed 09/07/2014].

¹⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 7. Some of this paragraph is a revision of part of my essay, 'All Bystanders Now?' in *The Merton Journal* 24.2 (2017), pp. 3-13.

¹⁷ The Second Vatican Council had opened in October 1962, after extensive preparation under Pope John XXIII. The fourth and final session, including discussion of religious freedom, the Church in the modern world, renewal of religious life and the Church's relation to non-Christian religions, was meeting during that autumn, 1965. Merton only says that *Conjectures* attempts to contribute a 'monastic and personal view' to the Catholic Church's discussion with or about 'the modern world and [...] other Christian Churches, and [...] the non-Christian religions' (p.7).

6.2 The Construction and Emergence of *Conjectures*

Merton's letters to Stone trace some of his planning and preparing of *Conjectures*. On 9 August 1965 he was still gathering material for the book whose title was yet undecided: 'As a tentative title for the book I have thought of *A Temperature of My Own*, if not the other idea I had long ago, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.'¹⁸ The first suggestion is intriguing, hinting at Roland Barthes' *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*, published in 1953 but not until 1967 in English translation. Merton's review essay on Barthes' work, written in 1968, was called 'Writing as Temperature'.¹⁹ On 17 August he repeated his preference for the *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* title; commenting, 'I like the title with *Guilty* in it, the way I feel now (feel guilty for having it so good)'.²⁰ Meanwhile, a brief letter of 10 August notes that 'the roughest rough copies of two other sections of the Journal, "Night Spirit" and "Dawn Air" are to be in *Blackfriars*. "Barth's Dream" was in the *Sewanee Review*.'²¹ He also mentions sending a 'more complete' copy of 'Truth and Violence'.²²

Extracts from *Conjectures* were published in *Life* magazine on 5 August 1966, a few days before the publication by New Directions of *Raids*. That week, Merton struck up correspondence with a young Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose articulate critique of the monastic project challenged and unsettled him. Merton sent Ruether a version of

¹⁸ *Witness*, p. 144.

¹⁹ 'Roland Barthes – Writing as Temperature' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 140-146.

²⁰ *Witness*, p. 146. In a letter of 26 October Merton was still wavering, suggesting that *Barth's Dream and Other Conjectures* is a better title.

²¹ *Witness*, p. 145.

²² Part Two of *Conjectures* is called 'Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era'. I am grateful to Gordon Oyer for unravelling some of the history of this piece. He notes that nearly all of Merton's longer 'Truth and Violence' in *Continuum* 2 (Summer 1964), pp. 268-281 made it into *Conjectures*, whereas several paragraphs of the shorter version, 'Truth and Crisis: Pages from a Monastic Notebook' in *Gandhi Marg* (New Delhi) 9 (October 1965), pp. 294-98, did not.

Conjectures in September 1966. Her first impression was of Merton's resonance with her own perspective, though his was communicated 'with a little more touch of melancholia where I tend to be angry, also without the agonizing I have done over modern Bible exegesis which makes it so difficult to make the kind of statements about "what the church teaches"' which she thought came too easily to Merton.²³ On 8 September 1966, Merton had signed a commitment to living permanently in the forest hermitage at Gethsemani, shortly before his essay on 'Love and Solitude' was published in *Critic* magazine.²⁴ *Conjectures* was published by Doubleday in November 1966.

Whilst working with Stone on this book, Merton was also working with her on another quite different book, also a reworking of previous writings. On 31 August 1965 he wrote a covering letter for 'a long article on existentialism'.²⁵ In the letter he suggested a magazine which might 'go with the "Behavior of Titans" stuff'. He noted that a new title for this 'stuff' was requested, and wrote: 'I think I have a fairly passable one: *Raids on the Unspeakable*. It is an improvement, I think, on a phrase from Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "raids on the inarticulate." It sounds a little more sinister and therefore good for a title.'²⁶ *Raids* is described in the author's preface as being concerned primarily with 'difficult insights at a moment of human crisis' rather than with 'ethical principles and traditional answers to traditional questions'.²⁷ This description is similar to Merton's introduction to *Conjectures*, but then moves in another direction, emphasizing the awakening of the reader (see 4.6.1

²³ Letter from Ruether to Merton, 10 October 1966, in *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* ed. by Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), pp. 9-11 (pp. 9-10).

²⁴ The 'Commitment to the Solitary Life (1966)' is in *The School of Charity*, p. 419. 'Love and Solitude' is included in *Love and Living*, pp. 15-24.

²⁵ *Witness*, p. 147. The essay is 'The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism', included in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 255-280.

²⁶ *Witness to Freedom*, 147.

²⁷ *Raids*, p. 2.

above). Might not the same aspiration be linked with other writings, especially writings from the same period, and in particular the book – *Conjectures* - in which the theme of awakening is so prominent throughout the central section? This too is a book designed for poetic effect of the kind which can occur when texts ‘react upon one another’.²⁸

There is nothing unusual about Merton re-working or re-using previously-published material.²⁹ There is something unusual, however, in his leaving detailed description of the construction of a particular passage, as he did in a journal entry of 20 September 1965:

I have been working on *Conjectures* in the afternoon – at moments it gets to be like Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* – criss-cross itinerary of the various pieces taken out of time sequence and fitted into what? An indefinite half-conscious pattern of associations which is never consistent, only purely fortuitous, often not there (and not sought in any case). A lot of rewriting. For instance rewrote an experience of March 18, 1958 (entry of March 19) in light of a very good meditation of Saturday afternoon, developed and changed. A lot of telescoping, etc. In a word, transforming a Journal into ‘meditations’ or ‘Pensées.’³⁰

There is no journal entry for the Saturday, so no further comment from Merton about possible influences on his meditation that day. The later published version of Merton’s private journals has ‘Cantares Hopscotch’, which may be a consequence of Merton’s sometimes indecipherable handwriting, whereas Michael Mott’s earlier rendition of

²⁸ This is like Merton’s reflections on the Psalms as poetry, a fact which supports a dismantling of clear distinctions between poetry and prose in Merton’s later work. He writes: ‘The words of a poem are not merely the signs of concepts: they are also rich in affective and spiritual associations. The poet uses words not merely to make declarations, statements of fact. That is usually the last thing that concerns him. He seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of associations to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique’ (‘Poetry, Symbolism and Typology’ in *Bread in the Wilderness* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1976), pp. 45-60 (p. 45)).

²⁹ Matthew Kelty recalled the process by which ‘in his manuscripts he was very consistent: Type the first draft, then he’d go over it by hand – in blue ink, blue pen – making corrections. Then he’d go over it again a third time with a black pen, and make more corrections or additions. Then have someone type it on a stencil, usually a novice. Then he’d mail that to his friends, then he’d get feedback on that. Then he would re-write the whole thing, then submit it to a magazine. Then it would be published and more feedback. Then that would be corrected and refined, then finally it would show up with a bunch of others in a book. It became a kind of pattern he had. He had a sense of being aware that he was somewhat isolated, and he didn’t want to make some obvious blunder.’ See the transcript of this talk in Appendix 1.

³⁰ *Dancing*, pp. 297-298. The journal entry is cited (slightly differently) in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 312.

Merton's meaning 'Cortázar's *Hopscotch*' clearly makes sense. Merton records that, on 10 March 1964, Miguel Grinberg from Argentina had been visiting,³¹ and had introduced him to the Argentinian Julio Cortázar, whose *Hopscotch* was published in English in 1966. The Spanish edition (*Rayuela*) of this 'first hypertext novel' was published in 1963, and Merton read Spanish. The comparison with Cortázar's work is an intriguing insight into how Merton thought *Conjectures* was evolving.

The most remarked-on aspect of *Hopscotch* is its format: the book is split into 56 regular chapters and 99 'expendable' ones. Readers may read straight through the regular chapters (ignoring the expendable ones) or follow numbers left at the end of each chapter telling the reader which one to read next (eventually taking her through all but one of the chapters).³²

Merton's mention of *Hopscotch* may indicate no more than his familiarity with and interest in a literary source which, at the time, was gaining public attention. There are no reliable grounds for making more of the hermeneutic suggestion than is justified by Merton's brief comment (and interpreters of Merton with a greater knowledge of his Latin American and Spanish influences have not picked it up),³³ but it is also possible that he was leaving readers a clue about reading *Conjectures* in terms of the literary forms which became more apparent in his subsequent publications. What more might be deduced from the comparison with Cortázar's *Hopscotch*?

³¹ *A Vow of Conversation*, p. 33.

³² <http://quarterlyconversation.com/hopscotch-by-julio-cortazar-review> (accessed 13/07/2014). Annie Dillard describes the book as 'an unbound novel whose pages may be shuffled' in Dillard, *Living By Fiction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p.23. *Conjectures* is clearly unlike Cortázar's work, and is grounded throughout in the actualities of a particular life lived in a particular historical context. However, the preface ends with a postscript pointing out that the 'notes in the book are not in strict chronological order' and that when preparing the book for publication he 'added many new ideas throughout' (*Conjectures*, p. 7).

³³ See for instance Mario I. Aguilar, *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* London: SPCK, 2011; Fernando Beltrán, *La Contemplación en la Acción: Thomas Merton* Madrid: San Pablo, 1996; Sonia Petisco Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution (València: Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2016); Malgorzata Poks, *Consonance of Voices*. Poks describes in her introduction the scarcity of serious scholarly attention to Latin American influences in Merton's life and work prior to her own study.

Cortazar does not clutch. Like the best authors, he trusts his readers. He constructs a labyrinth for them and then leaves them to figure it out. Physically, *Hopscotch* resembles a labyrinth in that it takes readers through its pages via an intricate, twisting path. The same is true for this prose that continually puts ideas in the reader's head, continually tries to catch her attention and pull her into a maze of interpretation, of clues, characters, words, ideas that point back at one another like, to use Anais Nin's words (quoted by Cortazar in *Hopscotch*), 'a tower of layers without end.'³⁴

The author trusts the reader to make meaning by interacting with the text. Whether or not this particular characteristic of Cortázar could justifiably be applied to Merton's *Conjectures* is itself only conjecture. He makes no such claim, but describes *Conjectures* rather as 'an implicit dialogue with other minds, a dialogue in which questions are raised'.³⁵ The minds to which he refers are those of authors with whose writing he engages, but the same could be extended to readers.

If *Hopscotch* is a form of 'anti-novel',³⁶ it aligns with the literary progression of Merton-the-poet during the 1960s towards 'ways of tapping the deeper, subconscious layers of his personality by freeing his poetry from form and linear logic'.³⁷ *Conjectures* is not intended as poetry in the way that, say, his later, epic *Cables to the Ace* or *The Geography of Lograire* are; but it is reasonable to conclude that Merton's thinking about poetics, communication and the experiences of readers applied to his preparation of prose as well as of poetry. Indeed, that particular distinction between poetry and prose all but breaks down when considering literature from a period during which:

Merton had been concerned with the necessity of creating anti-art as a challenge to the dominant art-cult that reduces artistic production to mere self-expression and self-

³⁴ <<http://quarterlyconversation.com/hopscotch-by-julio-cortazar-review>> [accessed 13/07/2014].

³⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 5.

³⁶ Something of Merton's embrace of the 'anti-art' movement of the 1960s is captured in Angus Stuart, 'Merton and the Beats' in *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge*, ed. by Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart (North Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012), pp. 79-100. Mott observes that 'Merton may have invented the anti-autobiography: at any rate, he questioned and mocked the conventions of autobiography from the first in the journals that survive' (*Seven Mountains*, xxii).

³⁷ Poks, 'Endless Inscription', p. 209.

advertisement. Such 'art' loses contact with external reality, which used to be its very *raison d'être*, and in consequence we have style without contact, style without communication, which, nevertheless, passes for communication with others.³⁸

In other words, there is no reason to read *Conjectures* or other ostensibly prose-bound works with any less attention to the particular questions of form and communication that might be paid to writings more readily described as poetic. 'The division line between poetry and prose progressively dissolves', writes Poks of Merton's writing strategy and style around the mid-1960s when he 'progressively withdraws from his verses' and 'hides behind anti-poems, "found" poems, that is, snippets of information which upon rearrangement can pass for poetry, and Poundian personae'.³⁹

6.3 Reception and Evaluation of *Conjectures*

Conjectures is commended as a starting point for readers unfamiliar with Merton, by the likes of Brother Patrick Hart, Merton's former secretary: 'That's the one where I think the full range of his ecumenical interests comes through most clearly', wrote Hart.⁴⁰ Robert Inchausti described *Conjectures* as signalling Merton's 'full transformation from a mere Catholic apologist to a contemplative culture critic whose essays built a bridge from the sacred to the secular and from the modern to the millennial mind'.⁴¹ Rowan Williams

³⁸ Poks, *Endless Inscription*, pp. 209-210. Poks refers to *A Vow of Conversation*, p. 13 (journal entry for 16 January 1964) in which Merton, reflecting on the victory of style over communication, writes that: 'it becomes necessary in such a situation to write anti-poetry. For what appears to be poetry and what appears to be communication is actually a common plot to repudiate poetry and refuse communication. The pretense has to be attacked with the anti-poem. The anti-poem is positive communication of resistance against the sham rituals of conventional communication.'

³⁹ Poks, *Endless Inscription*, p. 204. Poks traces Merton's venturing into blank verse, concrete poems and anti-poetry, culminating in 'Cables to the Ace and The Geography of Lograire constitute Merton's most impressive ventures into nonlogical forms of expression and surrealist landscapes; they remain his monumental achievements in alternative kinds of poetic coherence, associational rather than linear, exploring idiomatic and elliptical relations between parts' (Poks, 'Endless Inscription', p. 209).

⁴⁰ William Skudlarek, ed., *The Attentive Voice: Reflections on the Meaning and Practice of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Lantern Books, 2011), p. 137. Hart said much the same in conversation at Gethsemani Abbey in 2011.

⁴¹ Inchausti, *Echoing*, p. ix.

referred to how *Conjectures* 'had a transfiguring impact' on him as a young student of theology, 'drawing together themes and writers I already knew and loved in a fresh vision and linking them with the global questions about war and poverty that I was beginning [...] to see as inseparable from taking contemplation and sacraments seriously'.⁴²

Whilst Hart made special mention of the range of ecumenical interest represented in *Conjectures*, Merton in the preface wrote that 'the ecumenical view is not what is most important' in 'an age of transition and crisis, of war and racial conflict, of technology and expansion'.⁴³ He introduced the work with emphasis on critical public concerns. Elena Malits surveyed those concerns with her lists of the 'current problems' discussed in *Conjectures*: 'racism, violence, the arms build-up, propaganda, political tyranny, totalitarianism, ideological conflict, social revolution, runaway technology, affluence and the consumer society, urbanization, and mass culture'.⁴⁴ By contrast with Hart, Malits did not include ecumenical interests, but this may simply be because for her they do not fall under the category of 'current problems'. Malits chose the 'Guilty Bystander' as one of four overarching descriptors by which she mapped Merton's 'transforming journey', saying that the motif gathered up 'all the ambiguities of Merton's situation as he then perceived it. It expressed his understanding of where he stood and what was being asked of him in his third decade as a monk'.⁴⁵ Malits continues:

At fifty, Merton was a man deeply disturbed about the quality of life in contemporary society. He had developed a sensitive social conscience and a consuming concern for justice and peace; he could not refuse to pay attention to what was happening nationally and internationally.⁴⁶

⁴² Williams, *Silent Action*, p. 9.

⁴³ *Conjectures*, p. vi.

⁴⁴ Elena Malits, CSC, *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014), p. 75.

⁴⁵ Malits, *Solitary*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Malits, *Solitary*, p. 75.

Merton was certainly disturbed about life in contemporary society; but his sensitive social conscience and concern for justice and peace were nothing new. His attention to what was happening nationally and internationally had led him to the monastery.

Victor Kramer, editor of the fourth volume of Merton's published journals (from May 1960 to July 1963), wrote that 'a large amount of the inspiration for [*Conjectures*], a vastly reworked "journal," is found buried in the journal entries' of that early 1960s period.⁴⁷ In other words, according to Kramer, *Conjectures*:

demonstrates Merton's renewed creative energy in the early 1960s and his emergent openness to questions not just about himself, but about monastic relationships to other religious traditions, art, architecture, and the Church, as well as about society at large, especially issues concerning race, war, nuclear madness, and other basic threats to civilization as a whole.⁴⁸

Kramer sees *Conjectures* as being primarily a reflection of Merton during the early 1960s, at least in terms of data. However, it is what Merton does with his own data that is most revealing. In *Conjectures* especially, we find that Merton was producing 'far more creative, imaginative reworkings and extensive expansion of the original journal entries' than was the case with *The Secular Journal* or *The Sign of Jonas* - in both of which, passages from the private journal were generally unrevised. The contrast is striking, not least in the fact that there are only a handful of historical markers in *Conjectures*. It may be instructive and satisfying, as Kramer suggests (p. xvi), to undertake the painstaking work of comparing *Conjectures* with source material, but dates are stripped away, leaving reworked portions in a pattern fashioned during a transitional 1965. According to the author's preface, pieces are placed such that they react upon one another, in the mind of the reader. The actual

⁴⁷ Kramer, 'Introduction: Toward Crisis and Mystery' in *Turning Toward The World: The Pivotal Years, The Journals of Thomas Merton Vol. 4, 1960-1963*, ed. and intro. by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. xv-xix (p. xvi).

⁴⁸ Kramer, 'Toward Crisis', p. xvii.

manuscript sent to publishers visibly displays the complexity of composition, which may have been further complicated by the fact that it was poorly packed for mailing such that 'it all came apart'.⁴⁹ A similar fate would befall the manuscript of *My Argument with the Gestapo* nearly three years later.⁵⁰

6.3.1 Early Reviewers' Reception of Conjectures

Present-day perspectives on *Conjectures* benefit from some awareness of how the book was initially being received. Early reviews offer a snapshot not only of the reception of this particular book, but more generally of the varied ways in which Merton's voice was being heard in an American context almost two decades after the arrival of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. For instance, Aaron W. Godfrey described *Conjectures* as 'brilliant, learned, moving, self-conscious, and extremely irritating'.⁵¹ Despite weaknesses ('its tenuous organization, self-consciousness, flipness, and artifice'), the book could not be written off or ignored because through it 'Merton brings into focus quite trenchantly many things that are to the reader's embarrassment and forces the unsuspecting reader to re-evaluate religious and historical concepts virtually accepted as axiomatic'. Godfrey picked out and highlighted themes of non-violence and racism; whereas Christopher Sykes in *The Month* took Merton to task for his 'merciless' criticism of the life and conduct of the United States: 'I wish that in his day-to-day political commentary Thomas Merton had stuck to the intense, deep-delving, more disturbing character of his other conjectures'.⁵² In an ambivalent yet thoughtful review in *New Blackfriars*, Aelred Squire was similarly unimpressed by Merton's critique of

⁴⁹ *Witness*, p. 146.

⁵⁰ See e.g. letter of 27 June 1968 to Stone, in *Witness*, p. 153.

⁵¹ *Liturgical Arts*, p. 130.

⁵² 'The Judgement of Thomas Merton' in *The Month*, pp. 211-12 (p.212).

American life and culture, and his reflections on being American, in which Merton had not yet 'achieved the concision and affectionate, yet detached, penetration that [Julian] Green brings to these same matters seen in reverse'.⁵³ It was Merton's late reflections on the freedom of God '*as the source of our own love*' (his emphasis) which Squire highlighted, as he echoed Merton's lament that 'we live in a society in which for many people the values I have just mentioned are for the most part completely inaccessible'.⁵⁴ In the shortest review, William Habich concluded that *Conjectures* was likely to induce in readers the conclusion that 'we are all guilty bystanders if we are committed to Christian traditions and individual responsibility'.⁵⁵ Sykes had concluded that this is a book 'to read, and read again, and think about, and argue with in one's mind',⁵⁶ whilst Tom Carroll in the *Dayton Daily News* wrote that one 'should not take Thomas Merton in great gulps, at least not *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. His notes, opinions, experiences and reflections are no mere passing fancies, hence must not be taken in passing'.⁵⁷

Bob Woessner in the *Green Bay Gazette* similarly warned that this is not a book to be polished off in one sitting, but is designed to be mulled over and slowly digested. The only reviewer to refer to an 'ivory tower', Woessner conceded that 'some of his viewpoints are refreshingly candid and often represent an outlook which differs from that espoused by the tired pundits who make it a business to be oracles'.⁵⁸ Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, O.C.D. more directly criticized Merton's distance from 'the contemporary scene' and his dependence on

⁵³ *New Blackfriars* 49 (September 1968), pp. 665-66 (p. 665).

⁵⁴ Squire, p. 666 citing p. 303 of the Burns and Oates (1967) edition.

⁵⁵ *Courier Journal* (Louisville, KY), 25 December 1966.

⁵⁶ *The Month*, p. 212.

⁵⁷ *Daily News* (Dayton OH), 22 January 1967.

⁵⁸ *Green Bay Gazette*, 20 November 1966.

‘information from articles which are read aloud in the monastic refectory or from occasional newspapers to which, by exception, he has access. At times, one wonders if he completely understands our secular society.’⁵⁹ Harry Cargas in the *Globe Democrat* was less critical about Merton’s perspective, but made a point which might raise eyebrows amongst readers familiar with Merton: ‘As a Trappist monk, he has an objectivity which is important.’⁶⁰

Elizabeth Reeves in the *Kansas Oberlin Herald* found in Merton ‘a pleasantly conversational style’ and ‘simple conjectures, beautifully expressed, of a thinking man concerned in an age of transition and crisis, war and racial conflict, technology and expansion, violence and volatile situations’.⁶¹ By contrast, the same book was received by John J. Eckhart, a declared fan, as evidence of a sharpening of Merton’s ‘already fine-honed talent’ and a stiffening of ‘his predilection for the Jeremiad’.⁶² He sensed an incipient snobbery: ‘We are all snobs one way or the other. It’s just that I don’t think that attitude entirely proper coming from someone so free with his advice for an ailing world’.⁶³ The response of Joseph Tusiani was equally conflicted: ‘Praiseworthy, stimulating, brilliant is the insight with which Father Merton explores the complex problems of the contemporary mind.’⁶⁴ Yet, he asked, was Merton ‘forced by some mercenary abbot to publish his diary so indiscriminately as to make of it a potpourri of opinions and reflections that would attract neither publisher nor buyer were it not for the author’s name?’⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *Sign* 46 (February 1967), p. 58.

⁶⁰ *Globe Democrat*, ‘Concern for Individual in Today’s Angry World’ in in *Globe Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), 25 December 1966.

⁶¹ ‘For “Lent in a Year of War”’ in *Oberlin Herald* (Topeka, KS), 20 March 1969.

⁶² *The Priest* (May 1967), p. 402. The next quote is from the same page.

⁶³ *The Priest*, p. 402.

⁶⁴ *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (March 1967), p.531.

⁶⁵ *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, p.532.

In a brief overview, Philip M. Stark expressed some relief that the book dispels 'the shrillness of the excerpts published in *Life* a few months ago. In these pages breathes the familiar, authentic Merton.'⁶⁶ Stark concluded, oddly, that Merton 'never assumes a prophetic voice',⁶⁷ illustrating the point by reference to the 'Fourth and Walnut' reflections which will be considered in more detail below. This is one of two references to that particular passage amongst seventeen reviews that I found. The other reference to the passage is in Joachim Plummer, who recognized beneath the fragmentary format which irritated Tusiani a coherence which is the author's life as text. Apparently prompted into religious life by Merton, Plummer wrote:

I think it is Merton's openness, his vulnerability that keeps me reading his books all those years. Whether railing or whining or praying or advising or proclaiming or leaping or whispering or confessing – it is always *him*, he is always *there*. Everything he writes is a diary, his diary. In this stream, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* is his most impressive work. Thank heaven that after all this time, Merton is as questioning and feels as guilty as the rest of us.⁶⁸

Plummer the Dominican interprets the Fourth and Walnut passage as Merton's admission of a longstanding, mistaken notion of religious life as somehow removed from the world.

Neither reviewer made much of the episode, Stark hailing it simply as an example of Merton's joy at belonging to the human race, a joy which 'lies at the wellspring of all his writing. That is why it often puzzles and eludes methodical analysis.'⁶⁹

6.3.2 Comments on the Reception and Evaluation of *Conjectures*

Malits notes that Merton aged fifty was concerned about life in contemporary society. A point I want to emphasize is that he was no less concerned during his twenties. Certainly, his

⁶⁶ Philip M. Stark, in *America* 115 (December 10 1966), pp. 780-781 (p.780).

⁶⁷ *America* 115, p. 781.

⁶⁸ Joachim Plummer, in *Dominicana*, pp. 73-74 (p.73).

⁶⁹ *America* 115, p. 781.

writing style and focus changed, informed by the intervening years of experience and interaction, but to suggest that he was not concerned about life in contemporary society as he made his way towards the monastery is a questionable reading of the early journals, of *My Argument with the Gestapo* and even of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as I attempted to show in Chapter Four. Merton's social conscience and faith praxis developed qualitatively, and the 'guilty bystander' is by no means a straightforward motif in relation to what Malits calls his transforming journey. Merton's usage of the term does not imply apology for his vocational life choice, or even an enduring 'recognition that his vocation as a monk demanded a more thoroughgoing and concrete response to the world's plight than he had hitherto anticipated.'⁷⁰ For certain, there is evidence that Merton did sometimes think like this, but his continuous self-examination frequently led to a conclusion that he could be more committed, or more focused, or more effective and so on. What he felt he needed to do as a consequence, however, was rarely conclusive. He repeatedly questioned the meaning and continuing efficacy of his monastic commitment, sometimes questioned whether there was something else he should be doing, sometimes criticized the habitual practices and culture of his monastic community. In 1941, in what became *My Argument with the Gestapo*, he wrote of a determination to discover concrete expression of loving commitment. The pre-eminently concrete action he took was to join a monastic community, then to write and publish from that place. Thereafter he repeatedly queried and revised his understanding of the purpose and value of his monastic-writing vocation, attentive to its public effect.

⁷⁰ Malits, p. 76.

In general terms, his writings reveal more of a cyclical or spiralling search - for a more thoroughgoing response to the world's plight, or for a more fitting role, or a better location. So I do not quite share Malits' conclusion, because there is no unequivocal reason to consider Merton's monastic vocation in its entirety as any other than a continuous, concrete response to the world's plight, notwithstanding clear changes over time. The multi-layered vocation was also more than this; but his particular way of being in the world, along with the writing which extends that engaging presence, continues to disrupt and challenge assumptions about what constitutes the plight of the world, or what contributes to a better future together, or what it means to respond constructively and effectively, or indeed how we commit to and influence one another at all.

To reduce the trajectory of his life to anything like a simple disengagement from, then re-engagement with, (our) urgent social concerns is to adopt a narrative framework which too readily smooths over detail and risks minimizing the significance of his monastic continuity. *Conjectures* was published as Merton was moving more deeply into solitary living, not back towards a social context from which he had once dramatically departed. There was clearly no geographical 'return to the world'. The dialectical tension established by his casting off from mainstream society was sustained throughout the remainder of his life. He never came back, as it were, to the type of socio-economic location inhabited by many of his readers, but pressed on with the *contemptus mundi* he carefully delineates in this same book. His increased word-count on current affairs or recognizably social and political themes are certainly indicative of intellectual, emotional, even theological shifts, but within a much more complex pattern which is not helpfully described as a 'return to the world'. By not participating politically in ways more familiar to activists, for instance, he

continued to challenge the very framework by which effective presence and engagement is commonly assessed.

Because Merton emphasized in the opening paragraph that *Conjectures* is not about self-revelation, we might deduce that this is not a book designed for the kind of interpersonal interaction described in the second and third chapters of this present thesis. However, readers encounter through this text not only what the author thinks about a range of themes, but something of his character and ways of working. The author and his life are mediated in less direct, more subtle ways than in his autobiographical or journal-esque presentations. Between the fragments of *Conjectures*, between reflections and insights, judgements and observations which 'react upon each other', readers can discover a dynamic process, a chemistry, and a more full-bodied sense of the author at work, blending and making connections between literary sources, events and observations, and his own earlier writings. The process itself can inform the reader, inculcating habits and approaches for reading one another in a manner which contrasts with, breaks down and potentially over-rides more belligerent and reductively objectifying forms of communicating characteristic of the world from which Merton remained determined to be set apart.

There are ways of reading the full corpus which, like *Conjectures*, are not solely determined by historical markers and which aspire to more than mapping a historically accurate representation of a life-world. Attention to detail remains paramount, then between the fragments, readers discover a sense of relating to a person – even if that sense evaporates under too close a scrutiny.⁷¹ With *Conjectures*, the combination, positioning and

⁷¹ When I asked a group of readers at Oakham in April 2018 whether they had a sense of relating to Merton as a person, many acknowledged that they did. When I asked how old was this person to whom they related, they could not say.

editing of fragments which generate the author's persona and perspective on the world are firmly in the author's hands: the book has movement and structure which is not mirrored by the corpus as a whole. Having given clear instruction that his legacy should first be made available to an appointed (sympathetic) biographer, Merton then to a great extent relinquished editorial control, leaving readers to work with a vast deposit of fragments which give rise to fresh insights as they go on reacting upon each other in the minds, hearts and contexts of sympathetic readers.

Merton texts such as *Conjectures* illuminate the multi-layered, interactive ways in which the author invites readers into a relational dialectic which can yield insight or prompt affective response. The process may, however, be masked or curtailed, either by seeking to replace the editorial hand of the deceased author with too firm an editorial control of our own, or by inappropriately slipping into too naïve a historical realism. It may be evident enough, for example, that anti-poems or pensées or a macaronic journal are not designed as straightforward reports of the author's life and thought. The same is not so clear with a book like *Conjectures*. So Merton's re-writing of the journal entry which we now know followed an 'experience of March 18, 1958' might (especially before the source material was generally available) be taken as a plain account of something which 'happened' to Merton 'at the corner of Fourth and Walnut', despite the absence of clear historical markers in the published version. The process of re-writing was not widely appreciated until Mott published *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* in 1984, which gave readers a glimpse into a more nuanced and progressive process of revelation. The underlying episode in Merton's journal of 1958 was not accessible to readers for almost two decades after the publication of *Conjectures*, and the full journal became generally available only in 1996. In

light of the informal source material now readily available, we can see how a piece of writing, infused with other sources which influenced Merton in the interim, was stripped of distracting elements such as Merton's fascination with attractive women, and reworked into a short passage in *Conjectures*, revealing a creatively intertextual process which can inform our own interactions with Merton texts - and with the lives of others.

6.4 Circumventing Fourth and Walnut

With a focus on present-day reception of Merton, it is difficult to ignore repeated reference to a short episode about a third of the way into the third section of *Conjectures*, a couple of pages in a book of more than three hundred. 'We are all familiar with Merton's moment of Epiphany "at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district"', writes Derek Reeve in a typical reference to the episode commonly taken as emblematic, or as a key for interpreting the trajectory of Merton's life.⁷² Whether we are discussing a literary piece produced in 1965, or a historical episode which occurred in 1958, is sometimes confused.⁷³ The published version refers to the 'sixteen or seventeen years' the author had been 'taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking'.⁷⁴ When Mott identified the source material which referred to an episode taking place on 18 March 1958, readers could infer that Merton was saying he has been

⁷² Derek Reeve, 'A Few Thoughts for Advent', in *The Merton Journal* 24.2 (2017), pp. 26-28 (p.26).

⁷³ Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes writes, for instance: 'In 1958 Merton reported having a mystical vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Street [...] This experience narrated in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* marks Merton's transition from a life solely dedicated to prayer and contemplation to a life more engaged with the world. After this, Merton began addressing social issues more directly, and started to publicly denounce the Cold War in his letters and writings' ('Cultivating Seeds of Hope and Love in the 21st Century: My Personal Ruminations on Thomas Merton', in Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2014), pp. 140-142 (p. 141)). Merton did do such things after March 1958, but a connection is implied which is not self-evident.

⁷⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

taking seriously this particular illusion since around the time of his arriving at the monastery in December 1941.

Mott commented that the “vision in Louisville” has not worn well as writing’ by contrast with other oft-quoted pieces such as ‘the “Fire Watch” at the end of *The Sign of Jonas*’.⁷⁵ Then in his 1987 introduction to ‘Thomas Merton’s Journey’, M. Basil Pennington described the episode as of such significance that ‘it is necessary to see all Thomas Merton wrote before and after this experience in the light of the absence or presence of it’.⁷⁶ The episode, according to Pennington, signalled a shift from a faith-based concept of solidarity with human others, to an affective conviction of the same, which brought about Merton’s continual struggle ‘against the weight of his previous formation in the Cistercian Trappists’.⁷⁷ Pennington wrote with the authority of one who lived within the monastic culture and structure to which Merton was referring.

6.4.1 Interpretations of an Elusive Event

Since Pennington published, this episode has been repeatedly read as pivotal. A substantial brass plaque standing on Thomas Merton Square in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, at the well-trodden corner of Fourth Street and Muhammad Ali Boulevard (previously Walnut Street), marks ‘A Revelation’. The legend tells of a ‘sudden insight’ on 18 March 1958 that led Merton ‘to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues’. Seventeen words are quoted from the undated section in *Conjectures*, a passage which begins:

⁷⁵ Mott, *Seven Mountains*, p. 312. ‘Fire Watch, July 4, 1952’ is the epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 339-352.

⁷⁶ M. Basil Pennington, ed., *Towards An Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. 4. The next quote is from the same page of Pennington.

⁷⁷ Pennington, *Towards*, p. 4.

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.⁷⁸

In *Conjectures* the author goes on to reject ‘the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being’ and affirms that ‘though “out of the world” we are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution and all the rest.’⁷⁹ Following the same quotation from *Conjectures*, a page about Thomas Merton Square on the Thomas Merton Center website states that this was ‘a pivotal moment in the monastic life of Thomas Merton as he turned from the world-denying monk of *The Seven Storey Mountain* to the world-embracing monk of the sixties as he began addressing many of the major issues of that time’.⁸⁰

The ‘Fourth and Walnut Experience’ has its own entry in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopaedia*, which in relatively cautious tone negotiates the mythologized interpretation of Merton’s spring day in Louisville, beginning with reference to his personal journal, then reading back into it an interpretation of the later, published passage. We are told that the ‘vision at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, on March 18, 1958, expressed and

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New Edition) (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 153.

⁷⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

⁸⁰ <<http://merton.org/TMSQ.aspx>> [accessed 11/06/2018]. Also cited here is Merton writing after his experience in Louisville to James Baldwin: ‘I am therefore not completely human until I have found myself in my African and Asian and Indonesian brother because he has the part of humanity which I lack.’ What is not made clear is that this quotation is from Merton’s first letter to Baldwin five years later (*The Courage for Truth*, p. 245). Merton had in 1962 read James Baldwin’s ‘Letter From a Region of My Mind’ in *The New Yorker*. A version was published in 1963 as *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963). When Merton responded on 19 July 1963 to questions from the *San Francisco Enquirer* about his reading, the one book he said everyone should read was Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*.

has come to symbolize his transformed understanding of humanity, of monks, and of himself.⁸¹ The 'vision' is treated as historical, as happening on a particular date, which could not have been known by readers of published works until at the earliest the mid-1980s. For some readers, it has certainly come to symbolize Merton's 'transformed understanding', though there is no evidence of it being considered so significant by Merton himself. If 'this experience was a moment of epiphany, a realization of the divine made manifest in the midst of the human',⁸² it was not expressed in that way in March 1958, but only in the retrospective, hymnic writing of 1965.

Pennington wrote of the 'experience' (meaning the event in 1958) as an amplified sense of human solidarity and a 'very profound shift in consciousness' which 'effected the course of his development and orientation'.⁸³ Pennington notes that Merton had been struggling with 'some consciousness of his oneness with all others' before the episode at Fourth and Walnut, in light of which he discovered 'the freedom and the necessity to be to all'.⁸⁴ Whatever this means in Merton's case is informed in due course by, for example, his appropriation of Lao Tzu's dismantling, on the grounds of practicability, the notion of universal love. Merton went on struggling after March 1958, as Pennington states, with 'the institution within which he lived and the formation it sought to impose';⁸⁵ but by 1965, when he was re-writing the reflection for publication, his practical arrangements had been significantly restructured.

⁸¹ *Encyclopedia*, p. 160.

⁸² *Encyclopedia*, p. 160.

⁸³ Pennington, *Integrated*, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Pennington, *Integrated*, p. 4 for both quotes in this sentence.

⁸⁵ Pennington, *Integrated*, p. 4.

Fiona Gardner contrasts Merton's raw journal account of the event in Louisville with his published reflection, noting that the 'epiphany was possible because of his experiences in solitude. Such clarity would be both impossible and meaningless to "anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence."' ⁸⁶ It is the *nature* of collective existence which is being contested in the later passage, which is both a lament over a divisive effect of localized collective culture (in the monastery) and a celebration of a radical sense of connection with other persons, the wider collective. Gardner illustrates how Merton can voice what the reader longs to voice, as she appropriates and modifies Merton's words: 'If only, if only, Merton says, we could all see ourselves as we really are, and, if only, we could see each other in this way. The world would be completely different'. ⁸⁷ This way of entering into Merton's writing is not unusual: Sonia Petisco adopts Merton's hymnody of Fourth and Walnut when she writes of his 'tracing back the radiance of ... an inner light which streams out from deep within the springs of contemplation', and granting readers 'access to the divine loving gaze which is the very foundation of the world', such that we are struck by the realization that:

Were we to love as we are loved, to see as we are seen, to create as we are created and to shine as we are being shined upon, as he discovered in Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, there would be no more wars, no more self-deceptions, no more feelings of abandonment or scarcity. ⁸⁸

Petisco, the literary scholar whose book includes a chapter on translation as recreation, does not in this instance probe the way in which Merton the translator was redacting or recreating his own 1958 journal entry in changed circumstances. Rather, the voice of

⁸⁶ Gardner, *The Only Mind Worth Having: Thomas Merton and the Child Mind* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), p. 203, quoting *Conjectures*, p. 155.

⁸⁷ Gardner, p. 203.

⁸⁸ Sonia Petisco, *Thomas Merton's Poetics of Self-Dissolution* Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2016, p. 104.

Merton blends with that of the reader, and his words are once again reconstituted as present-day yearning, declaration or affirmation. Petisco's intertextual engagement properly culminates in religious declaration, though still suggests that Merton's much later reflection on theological implications were already discovered in the Louisville moment itself. If they were, Merton did not say so at the time. What is less clear is the way in which the implications of a recorded moment of insight, itself brought about by a combination of circumstances at a particular time in the author's life, were drawn out in light of accumulated experience between that first recording and a 1965 re-reading and in response to 'the greater, more troubled, and more vocal world beyond the cloister'.⁸⁹

A looser reference to the episode occurs in Waldron's *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton*. Waldron asserts that the Louisville event puts an end to 'any residual *contemptus mundi* that may have lingered in Merton's soul'.⁹⁰ This is simply incorrect, and indicates unfamiliarity with the literature. Merton clearly and repeatedly described throughout his final decade what was meant by his continuing *contemptus mundi*. Indeed, some of the clearest statements are in *Conjectures*, the book which presented readers with the reimagined Fourth and Walnut event.

It is in the first part of *Conjectures*⁹¹ that we find sustained reflection on *contemptus mundi*, which Merton eventually defines as 'a *compassion* for the transient world and a humility which refuses arrogantly to set up the Church as an "eternal" institution in the world'.⁹² Institutional structures of the Church are as transient as any other structures,

⁸⁹ *Conjectures*, p. vii.

⁹⁰ Robert Waldron, *The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton* (New Jersey: Paulist, 2011), p. 130.

⁹¹ 'Barth's Dream', esp. pp. 44-52.

⁹² *Conjectures*, p. 52.

confusion about which had led to ‘competition with the world on its own ground and for the same power, with contempt for its motives’.⁹³ The confusion is multiplied where ‘certain typical issues – especially lax sexual morals, birth control, divorce, pornography’ or ‘anti-Communism’⁹⁴ are assumed to be the focus of pejorative reference to ‘the world’:

Here we tend to forget that they typify the ‘flesh’ rather than ‘the world.’ The world, in the triad world-flesh-devil, represents greed for wealth and prestige, and this is seldom attacked. As a matter of fact, it is precisely here that, having ‘satisfied’ the Christian conscience by anathemas directed at the flesh, we can come to terms with the world which, let us admit it, offers us a prestige which we believe to be essential for the dissemination of the Gospel.⁹⁵

Merton had little time for the attitude of the theologian who assumed ‘that the world must accommodate itself to the systems of Scholastics and should cease to develop’, rather than being willing ‘to question the world, even if only to make sure he was still in contact with it’.⁹⁶ He was more sympathetic with the liberal attitude underlying an activist position, but not of the promotion of ‘advanced social thought’ over theology.⁹⁷ In response to the question about whether renunciation of the world continues to have meaning, Merton in this section asks himself what he left when he entered the monastery, and concludes that he left an understanding of himself ‘developed in the context of civil society’, his ‘identification with what appeared to me to be its aims’ represented by ‘servitudes to certain standards of value which to me were idiotic and repugnant and still are’ and by the ‘image of a society that is happy because it drinks Coca-Cola or Seagrams or both and is protected by the bomb’.⁹⁸ He continues:

⁹³ *Conjectures*, p. 44.

⁹⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 45.

⁹⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 45.

⁹⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 49.

⁹⁷ *Conjectures*, p. 45.

⁹⁸ *Conjectures*, p. 46.

The society that is imaged in the mass media and in advertising, in the movies, in TV, in best-sellers, in current fads, in all the pompous and trifling masks with which it hides callousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, cruelty, and fear. Is this 'the world?' Yes.⁹⁹

I am labouring the point, but the reason may become clear in the face of persistent talk of Merton 'returning to the world', coupled with another passage from *Conjectures* as indicative of that turnaround. In this earlier section Merton could hardly be clearer when he writes: 'I am by my whole life committed to a certain protest and non-acquiescence, and that is why I am a monk'.¹⁰⁰ He knew that protest may be meaningless, and that 'protest and non-acquiescence must extend to certain conceptions of monasticism' which he saw as no more than 'a fancy-dress adaptation of what we are claiming we have renounced'.¹⁰¹ It is precisely this latter challenge which permeates the account in the third section of *Conjectures* of a visit to Louisville frequently describes as epiphanic, and emblematic of a 'return to the world'.

When Merton, in a March 1958 episode, experienced a heightened sense of solidarity with and love for the human family, the overriding mood recorded was one of relief and affective liberation, however transient. There had been similar episodes previously, and more would follow. To say, as Waldron does, that Merton *now* considers himself a member of the human race,¹⁰² is not quite true to Merton's original expression of relief - following a prolonged period of frustration with the community, the Order and the Abbot - that he is 'still a member of the human race' despite his solitude and vocation.¹⁰³ He was relieved that

⁹⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ *Conjectures*, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ *Conjectures*, p. 47.

¹⁰² Waldron, *Wounded*, p. 130.

¹⁰³ Merton, *Search*, p. 182.

the monastic vocation itself did not alienate him: he was just another human, and that was more than enough.

Pennington's conclusion, that 'it is necessary to see all Thomas Merton wrote before and after this experience in the light of the absence or presence of it', is not unequivocally supported by the evidence. That Merton wrote more specifically and directly about public affairs during his last decade, or that his correspondence burgeoned, does not necessarily indicate a shift in direction, just a continually-evolving monastic vocation.¹⁰⁴ His journals evidence a gradual lessening of concern (from the mid-1950s onwards) with his personal progress in contemplative life, but this could also have numerous causes, including a weariness with writing repeatedly about the same things. A few days before the 1958 Louisville episode, Merton had already written, on 13 March, that he did not believe that his solitude could any longer mean 'indifference to or separation from what is happening to the rest of the human race'.¹⁰⁵ The thought precedes the affective event. Readers familiar with Merton's style - and the detail revealed especially in journals - recognize that this type of statement does not mean that he had in fact been previously indifferent to what was happening to the rest of the human race. It seems that this particular journal entry was written in light of feeling increasingly pressured to narrow down his spiritual life to the 'rather rigid concepts of this Order of Strict Observance with which, as ideals go', he agreed less and less.¹⁰⁶ He asserted that he could be a monk in the Order without making his spiritual life 'a carbon copy of Dom Gabriel's latest letter', which had clearly irritated him. In

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. his letter of 30 March 1965 to Czeslaw Milosz (in *Courage*, pp. 83-85), in which he wrote: 'Since I am now fifty, and just in general since the past few months, I am very much revising my perspectives, my relationship to the younger generation' (p. 84).

¹⁰⁵ *Search*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁶ *Search*, p. 181.

one sense he was, as he had repeatedly done and would go on to do with fuller force, railing against and resisting an instance of collective thinking which he experienced as suffocating and life-denying. The relief in Louisville followed on, just as his adoration of the women of Louisville on that same day followed a dream nearly three weeks earlier, about being embraced and loved by a 'young Jewish girl' who called herself Proverb.¹⁰⁷

As Waldron himself points out, the publications which follow March 1958 are a varied collection: *Thoughts in Solitude*, published weeks after the day in Louisville, is specifically on 'the spiritual life' and 'the love of solitude'. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* is retrospective; then there is a collection of *Selected Poems*. The opening chapter of *The New Man*, first published in 1961, deals with existential thought and 'the war within us', and directly undermines any simple distinction between contemplative living and social engagement.¹⁰⁸ Waldron rightly observes that '[m]any of America's bishops as well as a goodly number of Merton's readers feel that he should not be commenting on political issues, that he should keep writing his small, spiritually uplifting books',¹⁰⁹ but by continuing that sentence with '...like *No Man is an Island*', Waldron reinforces a misleading dualism. In *No Man* we read, for example, a warning against a self-preoccupied inner life, and a description of how spiritual practices inform presence in the world:

At times the psychological conscience quickly gets paralysed under the stress of futile introspection. But there is another spiritual activity that develops and liberates its hidden powers of action: the perception of beauty [...]. Beauty is simply reality itself, perceived in a special way that gives it a resplendent value of its own. [...] One of the most important – and most neglected – elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendour that is all around us in the creatures of God.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ *Search*, pp. 175-177.

¹⁰⁸ *The New Man* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), pp. 1-14.

¹⁰⁹ Waldron, *Wounded*, pp. 130-131.

¹¹⁰ *No Man*, pp. 26-28.

This is but one of many examples which undercut a blunt ‘before and after’ interpretation of the March 1958 visit to Louisville, and more broadly of a misleading version of *contemptus mundi* which depends on clear-cut distinctions between contemplative solitude and social engagement. The 1965 hymn of delight and celebration linked with Fourth and Walnut is in fact more like a narrative version of the perception of beauty and of radical re-visioning described in the 1955 publication, *No Man Is An Island*.

6.4.2 Reconsidering the *Conjectures* Re-telling

What we have in *Conjectures* is part recollection and part recreation. The significance of an event may, for any of us, become clearer and more nuanced over the intervening years. Merton’s reading of his account of the 1958 event in Louisville combined with other influences in the production of a new text. The first part¹¹¹ of this section on Louisville is a comic episode; then follows the ‘revelation’ sequence¹¹² in which Merton affirms that he does not ‘question the reality of [his] vocation, or of [his] monastic life’.¹¹³ What he does question is the way in which ‘separation from the world’ is conceived in the monastery as an illusion ‘that by making vows we become a different species of being’.¹¹⁴ It is a particular monastic ethos he was criticizing, an ethos he shook off with a ‘sense of liberation’ and with ‘such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud’, according to *Conjectures*.¹¹⁵ The joy of identification, human solidarity and belonging follow on, culminating in a celebration of the innate glory of humanity which overrides the ‘sorrows and stupidities of the human condition’.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ *Conjectures*, pp. 152-53.

¹¹² *Conjectures*, pp. 153-55.

¹¹³ *Conjectures*, p. 153.

¹¹⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

¹¹⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

¹¹⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

Freed of delusions about ontological difference, Merton reaffirmed a distinction between the monk and other people: whilst inhabiting the same world of the bomb, race hatred, technology, mass media, big business and revolution, the monk takes 'a different attitude to all these things'.¹¹⁷ We might ask, different from whose? The generalization holds only if by 'attitude' Merton means the simple distinction between those who live a vowed life apart and those who do not. The monastic separation is itself the different attitude. The clear-sightedness which this passage celebrates 'changes nothing in the sense and value' of Merton's solitude, which allowed such realization 'with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence'.¹¹⁸ This is a personalist declaration of the kind of autonomy properly associated with religious commitment which resists dehumanizing aspects of collective existence, whether they are manifest within the monastery or elsewhere. The author's solitude remains wide open to the people (not just women, in the revised version) whose secret beauty had suddenly overwhelmed him.

If Merton had wanted us to read this passage as historical realism, he would have made that clear. What we actually have, in his only detailed personal journal commentary on the construction of *Conjectures*, is indication to future readers that the passage is *not* a simple recollection or report, but 'developed and changed. A lot of telescoping, etc. In a word, transforming a Journal into 'meditations' or 'Pensées.'¹¹⁹ These few pages are part of the third section, 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air', a version of which had been published in *New Blackfriars* in September 1965. Merton had finally been granted permission to live at

¹¹⁷ *Conjectures*, p. 154.

¹¹⁸ *Conjectures*, p. 155.

¹¹⁹ *Dancing*, pp. 297-298.

the hermitage on 18 August, and moved in on the Feast of St. Bernard, 20 August 1965.¹²⁰

By the time that people were reading 'The Night Spirit', Merton was living officially as a hermit, away from the regular life of his monastic community. Whatever he was saying about the cares and illusions of society, his writing and publishing of *Conjectures* is informed by anticipation of, or the experience of, being no longer 'immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence' of monastic life, in which the 'whole illusion of a separate holy existence' had (according to this passage) been cultivated. This is not a questioning of the reality of his vocation or of monastic life as such, only of distorted perceptions which undermined a sense of solidarity and belonging, perceptions he was disappointed to discover where he had once expected to be free of them, in the monastery.

The later version of the Louisville episode bears traces of several influences from the intervening period. Mott judged this to be a weak piece of writing, not least because of Merton's blending of original notes with his reading of Thomas Traherne's *Centuries*, sent by Donald Allchin in October 1963.¹²¹ The influence of Traherne is, however, less immediately apparent than that of Louis Massignon, introduced a few pages earlier in *Conjectures* as someone with the 'rare and important vocation' of 'dialogue with Islam', undertaken 'as compassion, substitution, identification, taking upon himself the effects of what "our own" have done, knowingly or otherwise, to "them," whether in North Africa, the Near East, or

¹²⁰ *Dancing*, pp. 281-82.

¹²¹ *Seven Mountains*, pp. 312 & 613, *Centuries, Poems and Thanksgivings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

anywhere else'.¹²² It was Massignon who, in 1960, introduced to Merton the idea of the *point vierge* (virgin point),¹²³ which Merton interpreted as:

a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will.¹²⁴

None of this features in the original journal entry, where Merton expressed a sense of relief following a period of frustration and intensive questioning of dynamics in the monastery.

The prose-poem of *Conjectures* is, by contrast, part of an overall *Hopscotch*-type composition whose parts are intended to 'react upon each other', inviting a more interactive response than is implied, for instance, by a flat question about what happened to Merton. An effect of collapsing the developed version too readily into the 'raw' account is to risk losing sight of otherwise discernible processes by which literary, contemplative, interpersonal, affective and other contingent factors gave rise to a more prolonged type of epiphany for the author and, by extension, for readers engaging with the process. Epiphany is no more contained in the text than Merton's life is contained in the text, but emerges from encounter, disruption, attention, emotion, reading and writing, all blended and distilled over years of formation and interaction. The refined product (that is, *Conjectures* itself) was all that readers had until biographers such as Mott began to open up something

¹²² *Conjectures*, p. 144.

¹²³ In the *Encyclopedia* (p. 363), Christine Bochen writes that 'Merton was struck and moved by the idea of the "*point vierge, où le désespoir accule le coeur de l'excommunié*" ("the virgin point, where despair corners the heart of the outsider") when he read an issue of *Les Mardis of Dar es Salaam*, sent to him by Louis Massignon.' She cites a longer article by Sidney H. Griffith on 'Merton, Massignon and the Challenge of Islam' in Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 64, where Griffith describes how Massignon's usage of the phrase 'has its roots in the mystical psychology of Islam, especially as one finds it in the thought of al-Hallâj'. Merton includes in *Conjectures* (p. 148) a version of his journal entry for 30 May, 1960: 'Massignon has some deeply moving pages in the *Mardis de Dar-es-Salaam*: About the desert, the tears of Agar, the Muslims, the "*point vierge*" of the spirit, the center of our nothingness where, in apparent despair, one meets God – and is found completely in His mercy'.

¹²⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 155.

of the actual process (including Merton's working with his own writing and other sources), now more fully available to readers who can consequently be drawn into a dialectical interaction ripe with possibilities for re-evaluating what is meant by availability to the kind of irruption celebrated in the hymnody of Fourth and Walnut.¹²⁵

Before turning to Merton's personal journal, there is more to say about the literary context of the oft-cited pages from *Conjectures*. Preceding the Louisville section is a brief 'night watch' passage in which Merton, on the edge of sleep, is immersed in rain which, in the state between waking and sleeping, evokes a 'strange universe of birds'.¹²⁶ This is the section of *Conjectures* (introduced at 4.6.1. above) which begins with the awakening of birds, and ends with a night watch. 'The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air' opens with the portrayal of the awakening valley, woods and monastery. The eyes of the day birds are opened by the Father, to whom they address 'an awakening question that is their dawn state', asking whether it is time to be. Hearing an affirmative answer, 'they one by one wake up, and become birds'.¹²⁷ Awakening is granted and they are summoned. Last of all the birds to awaken are doves and crows. 'The waking of crows is most like the waking of men: querulous, noisy, raw.'¹²⁸ Reinforcing the point, the brief opening section ends with lament over human failure to attend to the unspeakable secret that:

paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off "one to his farm and another to his merchandise." Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 152.

¹²⁷ *Conjectures*, p. 128.

¹²⁸ *Conjectures*, p. 129.

¹²⁹ *Conjectures*, p. 129.

The third section closes with a night watch in which Merton is wandering the novitiate whose empty rooms promise revelation. He evokes the *Jonas* 'Firewatch' to which Mott referred, by way of contrast with the *Conjectures* account, which is populated by the absent presence of the novices sleeping in the dormitory above. Merton is reminded by their desks, their spaces, of 'whatever is most personal, most truly their own'.¹³⁰ Details matter.¹³¹ The detailed individuality matters. Their love and goodness 'had transformed the room and filled it with a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect: one might say, with Christ'.¹³² Merton then goes so far as to say that it seemed 'momentarily that He [Christ] was as truly present here, in a certain way, as upstairs in the Chapel'.¹³³ This is another epiphany episode, and another reflection on incarnation: 'Now that God has become Incarnate, why do we go to such lengths, all the time, to "disincarnate" Him again, to unweave the garment of flesh and reduce Him once again to spirit?'¹³⁴ It is in the particular 'humanity of our friends, our children, our brothers, the people we love and who love us' that we can see the 'loveliness of the humanity which God has taken to Himself in love'.¹³⁵ This is no generalized delight in belonging to the human race, projected onto passersby in Louisville, people who did not know Merton and about whom Merton knew none of the kinds of detail which matter about the people he is considering at the end of this chapter, whose climax is a profound gratitude for the specific people with whom he has been privileged to discover loving relationship: 'It is very good to have loved these people and been loved by them with such simplicity and

¹³⁰ *Conjectures*, p. 209.

¹³¹ See section 4.1.2 on *My Argument with the Gestapo*, in which Merton is similarly concerned with specificity and detail.

¹³² *Conjectures*, p. 209.

¹³³ *Conjectures*, p. 209.

¹³⁴ *Conjectures*, p. 209.

¹³⁵ *Conjectures*, p. 209.

sincerity, within our ordinary limitation, without nonsense, without flattery, without sentimentality, and without getting too involved in one another's business'.¹³⁶ It is on the basis of these actual loving relationships that Merton finds reason to 'recover hope for the other dimension of man's life: the political' as he retires from his work as Novice Master and moves out of the environs of the monastery.

This is more concrete and specific than the message recorded on a plaque in Louisville, that 'Merton had a sudden insight at this corner Mar. 18, 1958, that led him to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues'. If it did, Merton never said as much. More importantly, the high point of the *Conjectures* section is not the generalized affective episode which restored to the monk a refreshing ordinariness and buoyancy, but a revised firewatch reflection in which relationships with actual persons, and the details of those persons' lives, are paramount. His repeated criticism of and occasional despondency about monastic structures or his own performance of the life sit alongside the fact of faithful continuity in Trappist life and his continued movement into the deeper solitude of communion.

The *Encyclopedia* entry states that this 'experience symbolized a turning point in Merton's life'.¹³⁷ We are told that, along with 'his increased contacts with thinkers and writers all over the world, it marked the beginning of Merton's "return to the world" that he thought he had left behind when he entered the monastery'.¹³⁸ However, the very idea that he began to 'return to the world' at a particular point, because of a particular historical

¹³⁶ *Conjectures*, p. 210.

¹³⁷ *Encyclopedia*, p. 160.

¹³⁸ *Encyclopedia*, p. 160.

event, is already laden with pre-interpretation and ideological conviction. Merton did, from the late 1950s onwards, write more explicitly and intensively 'on a host of social issues, including war and racism';¹³⁹ but this was in continuity with some longstanding concerns. Public response to his early writings, persistent and growing tensions within monastic life, and conversation about Church and World generated by the Second Vatican Council were significant amongst many influences on Merton's evolving thinking and writing. The 'turning point' model does not quite do justice to these multiple strands or the ebb and flow of his literary output. More pertinently, it takes no account of the way in which Merton had already been a major counter-cultural presence in Cold War America since 1948, repeatedly affirming his secession from a social-economic system and culture to which he had no intention of returning. Rather, from the time he arrived at Gethsemani, 'Merton's spiritual journey included ongoing efforts to clarify and deepen his understanding of monastic experience, its historical and spiritual roots, and its role in larger society'.¹⁴⁰ His contemplative, monastic, communicative vocation was, in totality and in his own terms, an overarching response to dehumanizing social conditions, intensified as war.

The problem with perpetuating the truncated version of the trajectory of Merton's life is not only that the literature tells a more complex story, but that the (unintentional) fixing of a shorthand version of the story can undermine that aspect of the continuing work of Merton which relies upon the type of intersubjective dialectic I have been attempting to describe throughout this thesis. During his lifetime Merton remained a kind of counterpoint, a separated or marginal other, who continually challenged and complexified assumptions

¹³⁹ *Encyclopedia*, p. 160.

¹⁴⁰ Oyer, p. 66. Oyer goes on to say that Merton's 'sense of the interplay between a monastic vocation and the world of human affairs [...] also sharpened his view of the monk as one whose very presence embodied an expression of protest' (p. 66).

about what constitutes constructive involvement in 'social justice issues'. Posthumously he continues to do the same, if we allow.

6.4.3 Returning to the Journals, 1958-59

What is striking about the raw journal version of this day is how the celebration of being human segues into extolling the beauty of women, and into thanksgiving to a feminine divine, who is 'Wisdom and Sophia and Our Lady' before being addressed directly as Proverb. Merton's 'immense joy of being a man' seems as much about being gendered as it is about being human.¹⁴¹ This sense of being a man delighting in women has no place in the *Conjectures* version (though surfaces elsewhere in *Conjectures*), where the extended hymnic celebration develops into a meditation on the inhibiting or distorting effect of monastic seclusion, more aligned with the journal entry of 13 March, cited above. In that piece, however, the issue of obedience is uppermost, rather than the 'self-isolation' and 'renunciation' of the *Conjectures* passage. Indeed, the journal entry of 19 March 1958 is in part a celebration of solitude. It was written in St. Anne's, the tool-shed which had become Merton's place of solitary retreat. He was gratefully recalling time spent in the occasional hermitage and his 'eleven years since solemn profession, fourteen years since simple profession'.¹⁴² Solitude was neither a problem nor a complete solution, he realized, for 'solitude alone was not exactly what [he] wanted'.

On 11 March, a day of recollection, Merton had been entangled in an intellectual and emotional struggle to justify his vocation.¹⁴³ He happened upon an essay on 'Obedience and Fidelity' in Gabriel Marcel's *Homo Viator*, which sharpened his awareness of the distinction

¹⁴¹ *Search*, p. 182.

¹⁴² *Search*, p. 181. The next quote is from the same page and entry.

¹⁴³ *Search*, p. 179.

between fidelity and the childish form of obedience he was finding amongst many in the monastery. There is a line running from this critique of immature obedience to the more sinister forms of obedience represented in Merton's 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann' published in *Raids* in 1966.¹⁴⁴ If the visit to Louisville on 18 March gave rise to a significant awakening for Merton, it included awakening from the effect of distorted collective thinking and of avowed obedience to leaders from whom his trust had ebbed away. This was a recurring issue. In a journal entry from the following year, for instance, Merton was on 11 June 1959 railing against 'subjection to a *whole false idea* created by a man, and a community'.¹⁴⁵ The man in question was the abbot, James Fox. Two days earlier, Merton recorded the names of five monks leaving the monastery that week, questioning their 'general spirit of rebellion'¹⁴⁶ whilst commenting that Fox's 'unconscious ambiguities [...] are far too much for most people'.¹⁴⁷ Merton, cautious about forcing his ideas or will on a superior to whom he had vowed obedience, concluded that 'I owe it to him to ask permission to live alone here before I ask to leave'.¹⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the fact that to live 'alone in the woods might simply complicate life, instead of simplifying it',¹⁴⁹ he felt that the situation had become critical:

What I find intolerable and degrading is having to submit, in practice, to Dom James' idea of himself and Gethsemani and to have to spend my life contributing to the maintenance of this illusion [...] of the great, gay, joyous, peppy, optimistic, Jesus-loving, one hundred percent American Trappist monastery.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann' in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 45-49. It was also published in *Catholic Digest* in November 1966, and *Peace News* on 19 May 1967.

¹⁴⁵ *Search*, p. 290.

¹⁴⁶ *Search*, p. 289 (entry for 9 June).

¹⁴⁷ *Search*, p. 289.

¹⁴⁸ *Search*, p. 289.

¹⁴⁹ *Search*, p. 290.

¹⁵⁰ *Search*, p. 290.

The struggles Merton experienced had a clear and particular focus, and journal entries throughout this period leave the impression of an intensely unsettled man who wanted to live his better, truer self. There is no suggestion that Merton was thinking about returning to the social context from which he had so dramatically distanced himself. Rather, this outburst indicates that he was more troubled by the fact that the monastery did not contrast enough with aspects of a superficial American culture he thought he had left behind.

On 7 December 1958 Merton listed other aspects of the monastery that he disliked, characteristics he described as Protestant substitutes for an absent 'spirit of Medieval Catholicism' with 'its broadness, its universality, its all-embracing compassion, its joy, its understanding of man and his nature, its cosmic outlook, its genuine eschatology; its asceticism; its mysticism; its poetry'.¹⁵¹ The portrait of Medieval Catholicism is romanticized, but tells us something about Merton, his desires and his frustrations within the monastery and beyond. Four days later, just after the seventeenth anniversary of his arriving at the monastery, he recalled dealing with feelings of aridity and tiredness during Mass by thinking about why he was there at all, concluding that the 'only satisfying answer is "for nothing." I am here gratis, without a special purpose, without a special plan. I am here because I am here and not somewhere else'.¹⁵² He remarked that 'people who live in New Haven or down the road don't have to have some special answer to the question "What am I here for?"'.¹⁵³ He was comparing his life with other ordinary lives, which suggests some ongoing dissolution of misleading notions of specialness and isolation. Once again, there is relief in

¹⁵¹ *Search*, p. 234.

¹⁵² *Search*, p. 236.

¹⁵³ *Search*, p. 236.

the idea of a vocation which need not isolate him from others. If anything, his monastic living was becoming more grounded:

I have no serious reason for wanting to be elsewhere, though I might *like* to be elsewhere at times. [...] The point is not that this is a sublimely wonderful and special place. Not at all. To try to convince myself of this after 17 years would be madness and insincerity. The point is that it does not matter where you are, as long as you can be at peace about it and love your life.¹⁵⁴

Two days later, on 13 December, Merton seems to have been clear about the fact that there were places he could not be at peace. Mentioning going to town to mark his seventeenth anniversary in the monastery, he reassessed his earlier statement about being in the monastery for nothing. This time, the feelings were quite different:

Really I am here for everything. Being out 'in the world' would really be nothing and an awful waste. The 'waste' of one's life in a monastery is the fruitful thing; or at least it is for me. | The overwhelming welter of meaningless objects, goods, activities – The indiscriminate chaotic nest of 'things' good, bad and indifferent, that pour over you at every moment - books, magazines, food, drink, women, cigarettes, clothes, toys, cars, drugs. Add to this the anonymous, characterless 'decoration' of the town for Christmas and the people running around buying things for no reason except that now is a time [in] which everybody buys things.¹⁵⁵

This time, in sharp contrast with the better known reflection from earlier that year, Louisville affirms his monastic separation. Then, closing the journal entry in a way which puts into perspective the emotional response of 19 March, Merton wrote:

Walking up and down in Bardstown outside Krogers, in the cold, saluted by man, woman, and child. I thought that never, never could I make sense of life outside the monastery. I am a solitary and that is that. I love people o.k., but I belong in solitude. | It was so good to get back and smell the sweet air of the woods and listen to the silence.¹⁵⁶

Nearly eight months later, on 9 August 1959, Merton was thinking about another recent visit to Louisville, when he had picked up Blake's poems, remembering how much he loved

¹⁵⁴ *Search*, p. 236.

¹⁵⁵ *Search*, p. 238.

¹⁵⁶ *Search*, p. 239.

them and felt at home with Blake.¹⁵⁷ His friend, Victor Hammer, had brought some books on Blake that Merton had requested. The following week, on 15 August, Merton again wrote dismissively of his experience of Louisville:

Was in Louisville Thursday, about the printing of Gueric's Christmas Sermon. Hated the town. It was hot and stupid. Hated all the advertisements, the interminable attempts to sell you something, the unbearable excess of needless articles and commodities. Everywhere the world oppresses me with a sense of infinite clutter and confusion - and this is what is worldly in the monastery also. Too much of everything.¹⁵⁸

Merton was not this time overwhelmed by delight in realizing that he need not be alienated by his monastic vocation. He was far from joyful: he hated the pressure to consume, the clutter and confusion. He recognized in that reaction what it was that disturbed him about the monastery – its failure to hold at bay clutter, confusion and ‘too much of everything’.

When the monastery became a less reliable context of resistance, Merton continued moving, but not by leaving his community or commitment. As he moved to live in the woods, his life was not becoming any more like that of the anonymous people on the streets of Louisville in March 1958. Rather, it was becoming more like the life of a particular person he remembered with such affection that, at the very end of 1958, he was writing at some length about Herman Hanekamp. As ‘The Night Spirit and the Dawn Air’ culminates in attention to the details of particular people and relationships, and gratitude for love shared, so Merton’s 1958 journal closes with another sustained reflection on the details of a life and a relationship. It is these detailed, interpersonal connections - rather than the affective release and abstracted projection of a Fourth and Walnut episode - which stand out as vital precursors to the more fully developed thinking about communion which characterized

¹⁵⁷ *Search*, p. 315. He also mentions being satisfied with the rewritten second half of ‘What is Contemplation?’ but less so with the first half which retains much of the original material.

¹⁵⁸ *Search*, p. 316.

Merton's later work. Here are echoes of the emphasis on detail which stretch back to a fictional conversation in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, which as a whole challenges tendencies to avoid complexity and to abbreviate one another. The personal detail Merton gives us is a core component of his theological legacy, familiarity with which alerts readers to any tendency to abstract and generalize, such as happens in Merton's account of a Spring day in Louisville, and in much of the ensuing preoccupation with that episode.

Some ten years further on, speaking in Alaska about Christian community and specifically about the work of the Bruderhof (Anabaptist) pastor, Eberhard Arnold, Merton was looking back to the late 1950s and remembering how the machine-like rhythms of monastic life had 'made it possible to go through all the motions without any real love, or, at least, without any deep personal love for the people you lived with'.¹⁵⁹ In more measured terms he recalled in 1968 that there had been a sense of 'paralysis in the institutional community, that it was static and even a little bit false and liable to breed all sorts of odd things'.¹⁶⁰ Ten weeks later, on the day of his death, he once again affirmed monastic commitment and interdependence, making the point about self-reliance and not depending on structures.

Talk of Merton 'returning to the world' can be misconstrued as implying that he abandoned the monastic project which, I have argued, was his primary communicative action in the face of perceived social crisis. What might be heard is that Merton returned to the place where we non-monastic readers have always been. One effect of this

¹⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, 'Building Community on God's Love' in *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), pp. 93-105 (p. 96). The following quotation is from the same page. In a footnote on p. 93 Arnold is mistakenly described as a Lutheran theologian.

¹⁶⁰ *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 131.

interpretation is to collapse the dialectical tension established by his monastic separation from aspects of the world he clearly delineates as contrary to a wholehearted response to prophetic, eschatological traditions and contemplative attention to the revelation of God-with-us. Talk of Merton's turning towards 'greater involvement in social justice issues' may be accurate from one perspective, if we disregard or diminish the possibility that his going to and remaining within a monastic context *was itself* a prolonged, carefully-argued faith response to social crisis which, amongst other things, challenges our understanding of what it means to engage social justice issues. Interpretations of the trajectory of Merton's monastic life correlate with interpretations of the overall meaning of that life, of what his publishing and recording and letter-writing were for, and therefore of how sympathetic readers might engage the extant Merton corpus in a manner consistent with Merton's historical witness. Populist readings of 'Fourth and Walnut' can reinforce less nuanced reception of a book whose very title might lead to conclusions that the late Merton was lamenting having lived a contemplative monastic life rather than getting involved in something more obviously useful and productive. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* suggests no such thing.

6.4.4 In Memory of Herman Hanekamp

After Christmas in 1958, Merton was craving solitude whilst despairing that he was becoming less fit for it the more he needed it.¹⁶¹ In other words, this year of supposed turnaround ended with a yearning he had expressed exactly ten years before his recording of the Fourth and Walnut episode, on 'one of the most wonderful days' Merton had ever known in his life.¹⁶² On 19 March 1948 he was in the infirmary on the feast of St. Joseph, to

¹⁶¹ *Search*, p. 240.

¹⁶² *Entering the Silence*, p. 187.

whom he was profoundly grateful because 'as soon as I get into a cell by myself I am a different person!'.¹⁶³ He luxuriated in 'Plenty of time! No manuscripts, no type writer, no rushing back and forth to church, no Scriptorium, no breaking your neck to get things done before the next thing happens!'¹⁶⁴ He knew then that the way of solitude and silence was the way he ought to be living.¹⁶⁵

Ten years after this he would dare to admit that solitude alone was not exactly what he wanted. Then, in the post-Christmas lull of 1958, Merton wrote: 'I honestly begin to wonder whether my being bound by vows to this situation is not in some way a great mistake'.¹⁶⁶ He was not wanting to be dispensed from the vows, but was burdened by obligations to Superior and community, obligations which 'cramp and frustrate' real growth. He felt like a prisoner 'whether in or out of a monastery' because (he is honest enough to acknowledge) his 'liberty was too weak to carry' the burden 'bravely and lightly'.¹⁶⁷ The following day, 28 December, he felt better, having managed 'a full 7 hours of sleep for a change'.¹⁶⁸ Self-critical about his need for 'deference and consideration',¹⁶⁹ Merton acknowledged that he was not ready for solitude in 1955 when he 'agitated for it so wildly',¹⁷⁰ and that at the end of 1958 he continued to feel unprepared for it. Two days later, Merton had a clearer perspective on why Christmas had been so trying: 'We were sitting in chapter in a futile discussion of a point of moral theology – about absolving a dying man who is unconscious

¹⁶³ *Entering the Silence*, p. 185.

¹⁶⁴ *Entering the Silence*, p. 186.

¹⁶⁵ *Entering the Silence*, p. 187.

¹⁶⁶ *Search*, p. 240 (entry for 27 December).

¹⁶⁷ *Search*, p. 240.

¹⁶⁸ *Search*, p. 241.

¹⁶⁹ *Search*, p. 241.

¹⁷⁰ *Search*, p. 242.

and has not expressed a desire for the sacraments' when Brother Coleman entered the Chapter to indicate that 'Herman Hanekamp had been found dead in his house'.¹⁷¹ Merton summed up the situation: 'While we argue wisely about administering the sacraments to the dying, someone depending on us for material and spiritual care has died without sacraments. I cannot help regarding it as a significant episode!'¹⁷² In a manner strikingly different from the generalized projection of both his initial and reworked accounts of the affective episode at Fourth and Walnut, Merton went on to write well over a thousand words about the particularity of Herman Hanekamp, once a novice at Gethsemani, whom Merton described as 'one of the very few members or former members of the community that I have ever had any desire to imitate'.¹⁷³ And so he did, to a degree. His touching recollection is personal and empathetic. Solitude alone was not exactly what he wanted; but he did desire enough solitude to remain attentive to actual others and an essential interdependence which can be obscured as much by theological discourse as by the relentless distractions of urban living. In both accounts, Merton wrote of actual, not idealized or generalized, love. Less than two months later he was reflecting on a theme which would recur forcefully on the eve of his fiftieth birthday in 1965:

The main idea of this retreat for me is one from Kierkegaard: That the man who is constantly seeking an object worthy of love and constantly rejecting every object because he still wants to find one that is really worthy is perhaps in the end only pretending to seek and pretending only in order to dissimulate his own complete lack of love. For if one has love in him he will soon find an object worthy of love and will be able to love everyone and everything. That is my trouble—instead of loving I am only 'seeking to love'.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ *Search*, p. 242 (entry for 30 December 1958).

¹⁷² *Search*, p. 242.

¹⁷³ *Search*, p. 242.

¹⁷⁴ *Search*, p. 262 (February 17, 1959). The influence of Kierkegaard is referenced relatively infrequently by Merton, but had long been present. On 2 December 1940, a year before joining the Trappists at Gethsemani, he wrote, intriguingly, that the 'vow of silence idea of Kierkegaard's is something you keep coming across everywhere, because radios are forcing men into the desert. The world is full of the terrible howling of engines

By the end of that jubilee year, Merton was writing the Foreword to *Conjectures*. Its central section begins by contrasting awakening to God with the noisy awakenings of urban humanity. It closes with gratitude for fraternal love, actual relationships. In between is the re-written 'Fourth and Walnut' with its echoes of a theme which had run since *My Argument with the Gestapo*, namely that a community which is not porous to the detailed reality of other people can foster and promulgate distorted and destructive notions of difference which undermine a more fundamental awareness of human interrelatedness. Merton's Louisville reflections imply that a monastic community is no less (if no more) prone to those divisive ideas than are other societies. If we relax the dominant interpretative framework, then our reading of the development of this text falls into proper perspective in relation to other texts. Merton did not refer again to the Louisville episode. The heightened significance with which it is imbued is imported from elsewhere.

6. 5 Concluding Remarks

The intention behind my querying the intensified focus on this brief passage in both *Conjectures* and, latterly, the journal, is to loosen the grip of a particular interpretative framework; not to replace it with another, but in order to allow Merton's writing to do the work it carries the potential to do. As is effectively exemplified in his re-reading of this very episode, the author himself continually re-formed a malleable narrative, resisting and countering the tendency to 'freeze' a particular element of the multifaceted corpus, or a particular summary of the trajectory of his life.

of destruction, and I think those who preserve their sanity and do not go mad or become beasts will become Trappists, but not by joining an order. Trappists in secret and in private' (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 267). In the same entry are intimations of later reflections on priesthood, writing and public profile: Merton writes of Kierkegaard saying that 'if he loses his individuality in the universality of God's Law, a man's life will become an intelligible pattern for all. Of course if he tries to "be" something for others to look at, he asserts his individuality over against the universality of good works, and denies them' (*Run*, p. 267).

The idea of Merton's 'return to the world' can be heard by non-monastic readers as a return to *our* world, as though the monk comes closer - an impression reinforced by familiarity with personal journals. The effect is a collapsing of the dialectical tension otherwise sustained by Merton's alterity, his distance, his wholehearted (if sometimes floundering) determination to be as fully as possible transformed through intensive exposure to a biblical counter-narrative. It is by this dialectic between intimacy and distance, experienced as a relational dialectic, that Merton holds readers creatively between our own perceptions of present-day social crisis and a biblical counter-narrative which he had rigorously sought to inhabit and to communicate.¹⁷⁵ The solidification of a fictionalized event, coupled with a prevailing interpretation of its significance, can collapse the creative tension and reinforce a demarcation between writings seen to represent a (negative or immature) withdrawn phase and others which represent a (positive or mature) engagement with socio-political and other public concerns. The prophetic impact of Merton's immersion in monastic life and literature, his focus on contemplative formation, in a climate of social crisis, is potentially lost.

In its bringing together contrasting fragments such that they 'react upon each other', *Conjectures* counteracts this tendency by suggesting a way of approaching the corpus as a whole in a manner which sustains, rather than resolves, a dialectical tension between elements - with potentially revelatory outcome. Which is not to say that the book is in any sense intended as a microcosm of the whole corpus, even if, with his evocation of Cortázar, Merton was suggesting that the combination of elements is to some extent in the hands of

¹⁷⁵ A representation of this is Thomas Merton, 'Experimental Jazz Meditation', Recording # 213.03 (recorded 22 April 1967). Unpublished recording by Thomas Merton at the archives of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

readers. The mention of Cortázar, along with the introduction to *Conjectures*, nevertheless prompts the reader to consider, alongside the particular content of each portion, the interactions between textual elements in the mind of the reader, an interaction which may give rise even to new insight unforeseen by the author, but which is nevertheless signalled by the way in which the author's re-reading of his own earlier journal notes combines with his other reading and interim experience in the production of a quasi-historical 'pensée'. By reducing the complex text (and, by implication, a richly multifaceted life-story) to an overly simple narrative (such as are some of the 'before and after' readings of Merton's recollections of 18 March 1958), something of the revelatory potential becomes unavailable to the reader. Insistence on the pivotal significance of a supposedly historical episode, which is to some extent set adrift from historical anchors and mythologized by the author, goes against the grain of what Merton seems to be doing as he coaxes readers into the kind of literary tensions reminiscent of those into which he said readers are plunged when we open the Bible. In our repackaging of Merton, we may do the author no justice by replacing his own editorial hand with a more tightly controlling hand of our own.

The scope and variety of the primary corpus has grown to such an extent that readers are increasingly likely to rely upon guides to describe and navigate the terrain, or to identify significant texts; but criteria for describing some writings as 'essential' or 'best' or indeed as 'pivotal' need to be qualified. Careful historical reconstruction goes hand in hand with attention to poetics, guided by what Merton himself tells us are the dominant tones and themes around which counterpoints are established and variations composed, and by the continuity of his faith-motivated movement from one form of social organization to another. Talk of his 'returning to the world' can suggest a reversal of that movement. Yet he

remained distant and, by writing into the public realm in his distinctively interpersonal manner, became for us another node in the web of relationships which constitutes the Church, attentive to one another at the confluence of social crisis and eschatological hope.

CONCLUSION: COMMUNION IN A WORLD OF INTERACTION

'La mise en question du monde dans lequel nous sommes ne peut se faire que par la forme et non par une anecdote vaguement sociale ou politique'¹

A. Robbe-Grillet, cited on the title page of Merton's *Cables to the Ace*, 1968

Those who have made too much of a hero out of Mersault have forgotten not only his poverty and his somewhat provisional place in the scheme of Camus' work, but they have also misread the meaning of the Camusian absurd. Mersault's revolt against society's interpretation of him and his crime is a revolt against *a total systematic explanation* of existence which falls down not because it happens to be an inadequate explanation but because it is total.

Thomas Merton, *The Stranger: The Poverty of an Antihero*, 1968²

¹ 'The questioning of the world in which we are can only be done by form, and not by vaguely social or political anecdote.'

² 'The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero' in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 292-301.

My previous research into Merton³ traced an ethical trajectory through Merton's work, culminating in a form of resolution which at the time I described in terms of Merton's 'surrendered autonomy'. Returning to that work when setting out on the present project, I was dissatisfied with where it ended. One factor was simply that the research was largely completed before the publication of Merton's personal journals, the general availability of which has changed present-day readers' experience of the Merton corpus. The more pertinent issue was the idea of framing or modelling Merton *at all*. It was not so much that the model did not work, but that it contributed little if anything to present-day efforts to engage the realities Merton described, somewhat dramatically, in terms of social crisis, totalitarianism and dehumanization.

This thesis, by contrast, is less about the historical Merton than about Merton as known amongst present-day readers, theorized through interpretation of what he tells us he was intending or hoping to effect by publishing (and otherwise distributing) his writing. I hope to have offered here a fresh contribution not only to interpretation of our encounters with Merton, but also to discourse amongst practical theologians about ways in which theological literature animates and supports faith-based response to perceived social crisis. The partial conclusion at which I have arrived is that Merton can establish with sympathetic, non-monastic readers (that is, readers who have not undertaken an equivalent faith-motivated movement from a dominant social milieu to a contrary one) a type of relational dialectic, characterized by the tension between proximity and distance, or intimacy and separateness, or familiarity and alterity.

³ 'From Contemptus Mundi to Real Presence: Thomas Merton's Relation to the World, A Study in Moral Development' (University of Birmingham, MPhil, 1994).

The sense of proximity or intimacy (described in Chapter Two) is established through Merton's subject matter, his animating of familiar faith traditions, the manner in which he addresses readers and awakens trust, the ways in which readers feel able to adopt as their own his ways of seeing and expressing. It is established through the interplay or cumulative effect of materials (introduced and explored in Chapter One) which convey extensive detail about the author's persona, perspective and world. A sense of distance, on the other hand, arises from his faith-motivated movement away from a relatively familiar or comprehensible social-economic-cultural context into a contrasting one (as described in Chapter Four). The degree of contrast between his world and ours is not the main issue (Merton repeatedly encountered in the monastery versions of issues familiar to many of us); what matters is his full-bodied determination to live wholeheartedly an undiluted faith-life in the face of social crisis, which began in earnest with dislocation / relocation. Many subsequent episodes of discontent or agitation were, in essence, variations on the same impulse, tempered in the main by a vow of stability which he trusted would make way for the 'conversion of manners' that his work required.

Familiarity with the tension between proximity and distance (or intimacy and alterity) can acclimatize readers to 'a field of conscious and unconscious tensions'⁴ in which elements of prophetic and eschatological biblical traditions blend with other influences in modifying our perceptions of one another, our relatedness, our social circumstances. Patterns of thought and speech are illuminated, confronted, sometimes reconfigured, as the tension between proximity and distance translates into a tension between a totalizing

⁴ *Opening the Bible*, p. 16.

universe of discourse⁵ (in which controlling, violent dehumanization can flourish) and a kaleidoscopic literary world (of Merton, of Scripture) in which elements blend and interact, detail matters, and transformative revelation can occur.

Our experiences of Merton's distinctive way of communicating (as described in Chapters Two and Five) will always be subjectively determined, as might be expected of engagement with a writer-monk for whom personalism, existentialism and interpersonal relationship feature so prominently. Much depends (as discussed in Chapter One) on such things as the combination of texts we encounter, the pre-interpretations through which we receive them, and the unique circumstances of our reading. We get to know Merton in a manner which, for many readers, feels intersubjective. At the same time we are getting to know a representative exponent of (in the expansive sense) Catholic Christian faith - a communicative Trappist monk. It is Merton's monastic practice which ultimately undergirds his communicating; the writing and publishing are expressions and extensions of that primary communicative action, linking his monastic performance with our own various reading sites.

In Chapter Four I explored how Merton's separation and relocation to a contrary context can be read, in his own terms, not as disengagement from social concerns, but as the early stages of a constructive engagement with roots of war and dehumanization – an engagement which would continue and evolve throughout the remainder of his life. Whilst Merton's monasticism represented a separation from fundamental aspects of mainstream Euro-American society, his writing - especially after publication of a bestselling

⁵ Merton's 'womb of collective illusion' ('Rain and the Rhinoceros' in *Raids on the Unspeakable*) is one expression of this; another is Herbert Marcuse's 'Closing of the Universe of Discourse' in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 84-120.

autobiography in 1948 - ensured a form of public presence. This public presence developed into more interactive public engagement as his writing, and methods of distribution, evolved into more focused means of communication, not least because of his growing attention to responses to his writing. If his communicative monasticism was itself a constructive engagement with social crisis, then later writing on what we broadly interpret as social concerns are extensions, re-articulations of the same prophetic, monastic vocation.

Some interpretations of the trajectory of his life can, however inadvertently, collapse the potentially creative tension which Merton inhabits and perpetuates, and into which he invites readers. Suggestions of a 'return' (presumably to where he once was) can have this effect, so I have paid particular attention in the final chapter to an episode in Merton frequently referred to as emblematic of a turnaround, a notable shift, after which he somehow merged back into where the non-monastic reader is. Apart from the problem of fixing Merton too tightly within an established frame of reference, the *effect* of an over-emphasis on an ambiguous episode is to diminish the capacity of the literature to do the open-ended, interactive work with readers (as described in Chapter Five) that it can otherwise do. The kind of intertextual creativity suggested by *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Chapter Six) is frustrated when Merton himself becomes a 'closing universe of discourse'.

For sympathetic readers (that is, those who tend to read the world and Christian traditions in ways which resonate with Merton's, and who acknowledge the logic of his movement from one form of social organization to a counter-cultural one), the dialectical tension is not simply a philosophical or poetic conundrum, but an affective, even visceral, resonance whose strength emanates from the recognition that Merton is not so much the

cause of creative tension, but a mediator of our encounters with eschatological, prophetic, contemplative traditions through which he entrusted himself to God. He accompanies our rediscovery of our place in a world which is seen to be a web of relatedness and relational action (as described in Chapter Three).

It is not uncommon for secondary literature to continue reinforcing (if only implicitly) the kind of progressive chronological biography which takes bearings from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, perhaps via a street-corner in Louisville towards a type of resolution, possibly at Polonnaruwa if not in the arms of a young nurse or the interrupted tranquillity of Kentucky woodland. This concern for resolution is perhaps implicit in much of Merton's own thinking, not least the progressive model represented by the very idea of a seven-storey mountain. It is there in the classical sources which fed him. A version of it is echoed in assessments of whether or not he became at some point 'a more whole person' - an idea which suggests completeness and, by implication, a kind of closure.

What we may miss with resolution-oriented modelling is, first of all, Merton's changing perspective on the idea of progress towards a goal. Then we may be prone to collapse unresolved tensions with their epiphanic potential – or we may simply read a recorded epiphany as, in itself, an enduring resolution. By emphasizing instead the essential continuity of a counter-cultural tension represented by Merton's unwavering monastic separation, and his capacity to hold (in relationship or proximity) seemingly incommensurable ingredients, we can allow the fragmentary and incomplete corpus to enhance our capacity and willingness to be engaged by unresolved social, political and cultural realities, and to sustain relatedness where cohesion or resolution are unimaginable.

A Coda: Communing with the Stranger

Distant strangers in Louisville one ordinary day, when things came together and emotion found a voice, earthed an intuition which dispelled another illusion of disconnection. Only the author knows what happened, what was seen and felt. Years later, re-reading his notes in light of other reading and other recollections, other things seen and felt, he produced word-art as he had done and would go on doing so many other times. The art was for communicating with other strangers, present and future. He links us, present and past.

Where we can have no real relationship with him – at least, not in an everyday sense – there is always the possibility of relationship with one another, perhaps through him. In the end (he said to a weary Jim Forest),⁶ it is these actual relationships which matter most, between people learning to recognize and appreciate that, whilst we remain to some extent strangers to one another and to ourselves, we are interdependent. The strangeness and mystery, the particularity and irreducible detail, invite attention, care, even wonder and gratitude. We act, we communicate, at best animating relationships of trust, care and solidarity, sometimes reacting upon one another just as fragments of literature, parts of a book or a body of work, might react upon one another, generating by friction or chemistry enough light to illuminate a way of being together.

It was the actual relationships, the actual friendships which mattered to him: the very many friends and correspondents; the monks in the classroom, of whose tender strangeness he wrote in a refreshed, less violent, night watch prose poem. It was Herman Hanekamp, who died alone, with whose distant strangeness he identified to the extent that he wanted to emulate him, and in some ways clearly did. Faithfully flawed priest that he was, Merton

⁶ The 'letter to a young activist' is included and discussed in Jim Forest, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

became for us a stranger whose traces allow us to conjure a persona, a bystander who engages us from between our worlds and twentieth-century Kentucky and that eschatological possibility which is no place, but a way of being together and of seeing our togetherness. Just an enduring sense of relationship.

APPENDICES

A good number of Merton's spoken presentations have been transcribed and published. Some of them (such as his final address in Bangkok) have become well-known Merton 'texts'. Merton's spoken style is significantly different from his written style, even the informal style of his raw journals. The recollections of Matthew Kelty, transcribed for this first appendix, illustrate one person's perception of the care with which Merton developed text for publication. The process Kelty describes was interactive; but quite different from Merton's face-to-face interactions, which audio recordings strikingly reveal, and which smoothed-out transcriptions hide.

Naomi Burton writes of a transcription of an Alaskan talk, for example, that 'the editor has tried to remove the repetitions that one uses for spoken emphasis; to cut away some of the words that tend to obscure the strength of the message that he was delivering'.¹ Bernadette Dieker re-shaped Merton's Sufi lectures to the Novices (1966-68) 'for easier reading' because 'the exact transcriptions would be filled with typical Merton sayings such as, "Well," "I mean," "kind of," "sort of," along with many stuttered beginnings of sentences'.² James Y. Holloway writes that his transcriptions of a talk by Merton on William Faulkner (1967) is 'a studied effort to maintain the continuity of Merton's informal presentations and preserve his own phrasings' and to 'avoid an overlay of editorial judgments', then goes on to say he regrets 'the failure to be able to include all of Merton's "asides" – those splendid examples of his robust humor and humanity'.³ It is unclear, then, why he chose to exclude them.

Editorial decisions produce clearer pieces of writing, but the products are the fruit of a collaborative process, the nature of which is not always transparent. There is a parallel with some of the processes described in my first chapter. These comments about transcription are, I hope, in keeping with my exploration of the detail of our interactions with Merton and one another. In what follows I have attempted to write as accurately as possible what I hear Merton (and Kelty) speak, firstly to make apparent that this is not Merton's writing; and secondly to try to let Merton speak for himself before interpreting him. In recordings of his teaching, Merton is working in a classroom context, sometimes writing on a blackboard and evidently drawing diagrams. People interject. Some of that is recorded here. GPH

¹ *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals and Letters*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989), p.143.

² Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999), p. 132.

³ *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), p. 515.

APPENDIX 1: **'REMEMBERING MERTON': FR. MATTHEW KELTY REMEMBERS THOMAS MERTON**

The following is a transcript of part of a talk by Matthew Kelty, who was reading a paper he says was written in February 1969, for publication in a collection edited by Patrick Hart. A video of the talk is at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XbcKGJaaUM&feature=related>> [accessed 5 December 2015, uploaded on 20 April 2010].

[3: 36] 'He had a way of sensing when something was over, and he would end the matter there. This was a real characteristic of him. He loathed dragging things out beyond their measure. When something was finished, he was ready for the next assignment. When I was a novice, I recall that in periods of spiritual direction, he always seemed to know before I did when the matter was over. It always seemed to me an ending rather abrupt, but when I thought of it later it was simply that he grasped quickly that the situation had reached a point of terminus. In meetings of the abbot's council or the building committee or any such group, he was often ill at ease, because they want sometimes to drag on, you know, windy and long drawn out discussion which bored him and exasperated him. windy, drawn out discussions were not his thing. If there was no more to be said, he was off. Visitors and callers who had not any more than small talk got short shrift from him. But he was always courteous and kind to anyone who had a need. He wasn't hasty or restless, but he knew how to get off the phone. He hated to waste time. Had great reverence for time; sort of a sacrament for him. Always totally immersed in what he did, he never played at anything. In his work he was systematic, he had regular procedures. He had his work well organized, as we say. [5:26]

'I recall again from my novitiate days, that he would assign our work in the morning after Chapter, and then go upstairs to his office and his writing. Once in a while there'd be some question come up about the work before we got started, so somebody had to go up and ask him. And he was generally very short and even curt, he did not like being bothered once he was into his work. And he didn't mind insisting that such courtesy toward others, leaving him in peace and undisturbed, was a normal thing for a good monk. You didn't do that to people. I often helped him, typing manuscripts or answering mail. It's a difficult job, I couldn't read his writing. And you didn't like to bother him, 'cos you knew if you did, he wouldn't like it either.

'And in his manuscripts he was very consistent: Type the first draft, then he'd go over it by hand – in blue ink, blue pen – making corrections. Then he'd go over it again a third time with a black pen, and make more corrections or additions. Then have someone type it on a stencil, usually a novice. Then he'd mail that to his friends, then he'd get feedback on that. Then he would re-write the whole thing, then submit it to a magazine. Then it would be published and more feedback. Then that would be corrected and refined, then finally it would show up with a bunch of others in a book. It became a kind of pattern he had. He had a sense of being aware that he was somewhat isolated, and he didn't want to make some obvious blunder. The vast amount of material was never published – we still haven't. They're working on it!

'He had system, he had plans in what he did, and what time, what things he had to do during the day. What type of reading he would do and when. He liked to save steps, and time: On the way to church, to choir, he'd mail his letters, and check the bulletin board, or pick up a pair of shoe-strings. Or get some razor blades. But he did it easily, without tension. Good at keeping appointments. He had an air of despatch in what he did, generally was thorough, [...] rather hasty. Had fine insights into people. Good judge of character. Sometimes blundered in his interviews with postulants. But overall his perception was above average. And he could be open to discussion, see your view too. But once he had his mind made up, he was hard to change.' [ENDS]

APPENDIX 2: CULTURE, RELIGION, AND FORMATION: AN EPILOGUE (8 DECEMBER 1967)

The following is a transcript of part of a recording by Merton on 8 December 1967, at the end of a tape addressed to nuns for whom he had been leading a retreat from 4-7 December 1967. Recording of the event is published commercially as mp3 and set of 11 CDs. This is from Track 11 (Epilogue Pt. 1) of Thomas Merton, *'Solitude and Togetherness, with an Afterword by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D.'* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).

'Well it's the next morning, it's December the 8th, and we still have a little bit of tape left on this side and I'd like to use it.... Another thought that just occurred from some reading I'm doing.... Still dark. And a beautiful night, I was out looking at the stars. The Christian message is obviously not just an aristocratic message for a few. It is for everybody. But in proportion as it is *spread out* it may tend to get diffuse and may tend to be diluted in a certain way. And so it is necessary therefore to have communities like ours where everything is lived in a very simple, very pure and very intense form without the dilution and the sort of evaporation that comes with spreading out among, er, spreading out *in* the world. Of course there is a, it is true that there is a great strength that comes from contact, human contact with those who are not of our faith, and er dialogue with them and so forth. But there is necessary a certain concentration as opposed to proselytizing, and er this concentration, this *centering* on the purity of the Christian experience in all its simplicity, the purity of faith, and the purity of true fidelity to our inmost experience, the experience of Christ living in us and in our communities, is very important and in this article I'm reading, a man from the *Institut Catholique* in France, in Paris, speaking in this connection of those who live this particularly concentrated life of fidelity and purity to the central experience of Christianity, he makes this statement: "The multitude of the called have to be redeemed by the small number of the chosen." It's a kind of nice exegesis of that text of our Lord and it gets us back to the old familiar, even conventional, view of the apostolate of contemplatives. But we really do have to appreciate the fact that the purity of our life, its special kind of fidelity, its hiddenness, its concentration upon the purity and perfection of the central Christian experience of Christ dwelling in us, the Holy Trinity living in us in the way that we were talking about yesterday, it's terribly important, and we must not let anybody turn us aside from this into something that would simply result in a kind of evaporation and a

dispersion and a loss of something that is so true and so real. But it does have to be cultivated. And we have to remember the dimension of our quiet, silence, prayer and so forth. The special atmosphere of the contemplative life which has to be preserved. But not just in a *defence* operation, so to speak. Not just negatively shutting out the world, but positively and with love; deepening our awareness of Christ, our love of him. This movement of awareness, of interiorization, all this is, er, this *has* built into it somewhere a sense of the... *limit*, the sense of the personal, one's personal frontier, one's personal, a certain distance. well as communities we should keep a healthy sense of distance, a healthy sense of limit, of boundary. Not the false, artificial boundary of the iron grille and all that, but nevertheless a clear sense of identity. See, cloister for us is our identity. It's not just a legal thing, it is our, at once our identity, our privilege, our character so to speak. It is what sets us within our own particular limits, the limits which are defined by our striving, the striving of our love... to experience the fullness of Christ's love for us, and to let that life really grow and expand in us, in this particular kind of way. Hence, there should be in us a kind of limit, an instinctive sense of limit and threshold, and a realization that there are things, there are limits and barriers that we do not go beyond. The great difference is, however, not that these limits and barriers are defined for us by laws made by somebody else, but they are defined by us interiorly, by the Holy Spirit, by an intuitive sense of what fits our deepest aspirations, and our deepest *tending* to union with God. And of course the great point of formation in our life is precisely to develop that kind of sense, not simply to instruct people in the niceties of canon law about enclosure, but to give them a *sense* of limit, a sense of identity, a cloistered identity, so to speak. Which preserves itself and preserves its own self-respect and its own capacity to love by not letting it be *confused* and dispersed in what is completely irrelevant to it. And I know very well that all of us who have lived at all in the contemplative life, develop that, and I have experienced the fact.... for some reason which you can't explain you sense an enormous difference in the kind of contacts that you run into.... [to 18:00].

APPENDIX 3: TRUE COMMUNITY, TRUE RELATIONSHIP (4 DECEMBER 1967)

The following is a transcript of part of a recording by Merton on 4 December 1967, of Merton leading a retreat with nuns from 4-7 December 1967. Recording of the event is published commercially as mp3 and set of 11 CDs. This is from Track 1 (True Community, True Relationship) of Thomas Merton, *'Solitude and Togetherness, with an Afterword by Fr. Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D.'* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012).

'The basic experience of all religious in our time, and especially of contemplative religious in our time, has been this terrible struggle so many people go through, of knowing in their heart that something is asked of them by God, and being prevented from doing it. This I would say is *the* fight. It's a real problem. [...] We have to admit the fact that we get kids in the cloister who come up to you saying that, if I stay here any more my life is going to be wasted. And you know for some people that's not true, and for some other people it *is* true. we have to face the fact. And we know there are some people who come to us and say, 'I have to leave in order to follow God more perfectly.' Whereas on our books, in black and white, it says this is where you follow God most perfectly. See, there's our problem. And of course this is the jam we're all in. [...]

'[...] And the key word is presence. The great thing that we have to do now is not a matter of a duty or a job or anything like that.... It is simply to be present to one another, for these two or three days. Which means, you've got to do some talking too. See, I want to get to know you. You want to get to know me because probably just from reading my books you don't know me. Everybody get a look at the real thing.... I really shouldn't be masquerading in this religious habit 'cause what I usually wear is a pair of overalls.... It's so important to realise that the church is presence.... Community is presence, not institution, see. What we've been banging on is the ability to substitute institution for real presence. Take the question, for example, of silence.... Just take the question of Trappist silence, our specialty here... This is a great source of problems, and also a great source of graces. But when it gets to be formalized to a certain point it ceases to be a source of grace and becomes a source of problems. Because it is not any longer helping presence... For us, for a long time, the rule of silence was a means of being absent from one another. Now if you run a community on the basis that everybody is put together to be absent from one another, you are creating something contradictory in terms. And if you create

something contradictory in terms then throw people into it, they're going to hurt. And then if when they hurt, you tell them you haven't got faith, they will follow you for a little while. But after a while they will say this gymnastic is not worth doing for a lifetime.... The contemplative life is not just systematic frustration. And it's not systematic frustration, for example the question of cultural values is not just systematic frustration of cultural values. A person has to be able to get along without... I mean, you can't bank on hearing a symphony every night, but... And one has to be able to get along without it. But it's not just *for* that, see.... If a person *likes* a symphony, well then it, that's not a sign that that's what that person should never hear. Now that's what we have, we've tended to interpret it that way in the Trappist life especially, I mean we've got a bad reputation for that kind of thing, we haven't really done it that way. But that is sort of built into our life. [...] So therefore silence was operating in such a way that you had to pretend that nobody else was there. You were silent because you were sort of excluding people. Now, whenever people are together there is some kind of presence. And when people are together silent and embarrassed there's a very definite kind of presence.... we all know this. And what you get is an ulcer.... Now, you can be present to other people by just plain talking, or by being with them without talking and having ulcers. Which is best? The thing to do is to arrange it in such a way that there is enough communication for them not to have to communicate by ulcers. But ulcers are a form of communication. This is what happens when a person, or the various other kind of internal troubles that people get, see, these are usually, these so-called psychosomatic, nervous things in your stomach or allergies of which I have a large number, most of these things are tied up with the problem of communication, see. Where, I mean you don't find these things in a primitive society where everybody is present to everybody else, and everybody knows who people are, and so forth, and everybody's at home and so forth. You don't find stomach ulcers in, maybe you do now, in places like [Taipei?] and so forth, they just never have, until the Europeans came along. These things don't exist where you've got real community, see. [...] So therefore silence, if we can't learn to be present to one another in silence, then we have to talk until we do learn. But a person who has a real contemplative vocation wants silence, and wants it for real.

APPENDIX 4: **RAINER MARIA RILKE: POETRY AND IMAGINATION (11/14/1965)**

The following is a transcript of part of a recording by Merton on 14 November 1965, of Merton beginning to teach at the Abbey of Gethsemani on Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). Recording of the series of 11 talks is published commercially as mp3 and set of 5 CDs. This is from Track 1 ('Rainer Maria Rilke: Poetry and Imagination') of Thomas Merton, "'God Speaks to Each of Us": The Poetry and Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke' with an Afterword by Dr. Michael W. Higgins, Ph.D.' (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, c2012).

'What is a poetic experience? Remember, this is something we were emphasizing two or three months ago, and we want to go back into that because it is important because through lack of understanding how you connect with reality artistically and poetically, we tend to miss a great deal in our religious life, in our spiritual life because poetic experience is analogous to religious experience. Religious experience is the same thing much deeper but nevertheless it is good to know what poetic experience is, what artistic experience is, and what it is not, so that we will be able to, ah, meet reality in that particular way and apply that to our religious experience, see. Now Rilke is sometimes called a mystic, which he isn't, but he is like a mystic, I mean he, he makes noises like a mystic every once in a while because he's a lot more like a mystic than a lot of, a of religious people are, because of this particular *depth* where he is at, see, he functions on a, on a *deep level* where most of us don't function, see. So it's a good idea to know what this deep level is. Now look, let's start out with a picture [*sounds of chalk on a board*] or something. What happens when you *encounter* a poem or a symphony or a work of art or something like that, what normally should happen?... Now, what does it strike first? What does it hit first when you see it? Brother Denis [*'your ear'*] Senses. It hits your senses. So you, you perceive with your senses, that there's something going on out there, see, there's a guy singing or there's some music coming in or there's a, the programme is better than it was ten minutes ago or something like that, it's different from the commercial, see, and, not much but some [*laughter*]. Commercials are the great works of art actually. It's where all the talent is, all the talent today, the Leonardo da Vincis and so forth, they're all in the advertising business today, see. It's where it's all going. Down the drain. So, it hits your senses. Now, where does it go after that? [*silent pause*]. Don't all speak at once [*laughter, then 'your imagination'*]. Imagination, all

right, let's include that in here, it's an *interior* sense. So it's your imagination. And then after that, of course imagination, remember when we were talking 'bout, 'bout Blake. When you say imagination you're getting into something pretty deep, because there's imagination and there's imagination. What *normally* people think of as imagination is simply fantasy, see. That's what you use when you're making your evening meditation [*laughter*]. See, that's, that's where you get the mental movies, is fantasy. But imagination is not fantasy. Imagination is creative. And when you get imagination in this particular sense it is creative and re-creative and it's a function of the intellect, see. It is a *deep* thing. Now, so if actually you are really connecting with a work of art or poetry you are *re-creating*, see. You hear something of Mozart or you hear something of, you read a poem or something, you begin *re-creating*, you, you've *got* to re-create, yourself, the experience of the poet, otherwise you don't connect, see. So, this means that there has to be some kind of creative imagination. Ah, the artist makes you an artist, whether you like it or not or else you don't connect. And so let's, let's just say then, pushing it beyond that, well, what is the deepest part of yourself, your heart or something or your *whole self* or some, some darn thing, let's just say it's for the *self*, see. It gets right into the depths of *you*. Now, this is the way it *ought* to be, see. And we'll come back to this picture in a minute, but *normally*, I'm afraid, what really does happen, I mean somebody now is serious, he wants to connect with a work of art, see, he sees it, so forth, it hits his senses, it's got to hit his senses if it doesn't hit his senses nothing happens. But what usually happens, a person is ambling around and he *sees* something and something begins to glimmer in his mind, 'This is a work of *art*,' see. Does he then immediately go from here to here? Not on your life! What does he immediately *do*? Well what does he, what does he really *do*? [5'53"] Anybody. Father __ [*'reasoning about it.'*] He starts reasoning about it. You see, what he does, he goes up here, see. And the first thing he says, see, he says, 'what is it? Who did it? Gimme the catalogue, see. What number is that (see)?, Oh, that's number 222, see. That's Raphael [*pron. Ray-fel*], he's a great artist. I like it. Or else he looks through the thing and then he, he says this is some artist I never heard of, see. It's no good, see. And what happens then is this reflexive business, it comes up here, he gets to *identify* or to *classify* it, see. And then he, having identified and classified it, he may even reflect a little further on the identification, see. Can I identify with this work of art? Can I allow myself

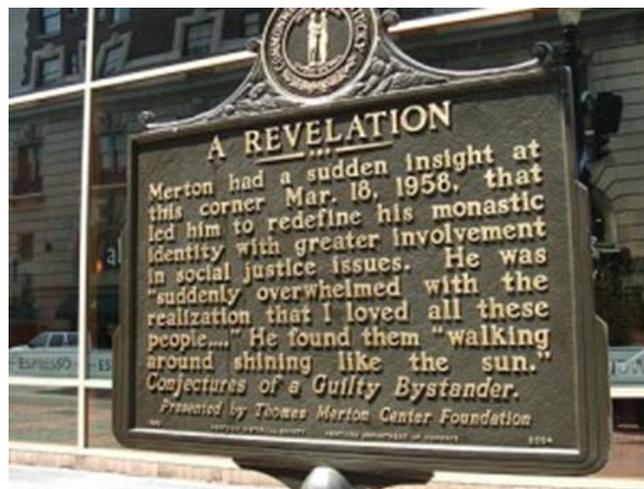
to be known as having identified with this work of art? Having done that, he's done everything, see. Then he's through with it, see. He, after that he isn't going to bother with it any more because he's *exhausted* from this *effort* of committing himself to saying whether he likes it or not. I've liked it; I've won this time; let's go on with the next thing; let's turn on the baseball game, see. Or anything like that. So what happens is if he even *does* come back to the work of art itself, he never really gets to it. Now this, you think I'm being funny and all that stuff, but this is what everybody *does*, see. And this you can't afford to do; I mean that, you just don't even try, don't *turn on* the symphony, see, or don't *open* the book of poetry or don't *look at* the picture rather than doing that, see. *If you are gonna do that, don't look at anything; go look at something you like, see; I don't care what it is, so long as you can get into this direct contact with it, I don't care what it is. A candy box, anything. So long as you get this direct contact and not this indirect, ah, really evasion of the thing. Now with Rilke, the point about Rilke is, he does this better than anybody. If you can once get onto him, you will find that through Rilke, you can get the poetic experience. You can see what a poetic experience is better than with any other modern poet. Especially if you know a little German. It's not so hot with the English, I must admit that. But, Rilke is the man of poetic sensibility, that's what's right with him and that's what's wrong with him. At some points he's got too much, see. And sometimes his experience isn't particularly one you want to identify with. At least I don't, some of 'em. Because he's a little bit, he's a little bit too much. But, when he's really grooving, he's good, and you can really find out from him what this poetic experience is. And it's not a question of judgement; it's a question of a direct perception of reality, but in a very special way, a re-creative perception of reality. It is not just simply, that is a microphone, see. But, what is this particular relationship, of course the relationship between me and this microphone at the present moment is of no interest whatever, see. But if you run into something that is an interesting relationship, what is this relationship? See. What is this encounter between me and life through this particular object? And so forth. So that's what I want to talk about. And working on maybe two conferences on that, maybe three. Now of course Rilke, if you're gonna read him, don't look at his picture first.... [9'35"]*

[12'08"] ... Now the thing that he is working at, the thing you wanna, to get to, is he is a poet of what they call, in German so we may as well have it on the board, *Innerlichkeit*. Which means inwardness, or interiority. Yes? [*one other source of Rilke is in Gabriel Marcel's Homo Viator...*]

Oh, has he got something on Rilke there?... But that's good, because the, the, Rilke would come out pretty good in Marcel. Marcel would be the kind of he's, he's somewhat existentialist. He's not really an existentialist but the existentialists would like him, would be able to get something out of it, so Gabriel Marcel will give you a good commentary on his early poems. See that's worth getting into. Why would an existentialist like something like this? Because existentialism is concerned with the same thing, *direct connection with life*. Not going through this process of getting up into the attic where somebody's got ideas about it, and looking in the card file and saying is it approved or isn't it approved? What is it? See. Do you see it or don't you? So, that's good. That would be a good place to look. Now he is a poet of *inwardness*. Now, this means to say, that, this is interesting for us because we're here living an interior life, see. What *is* this inwardness? What is this interior life? This is, this is, actually start talking about interior life round here, it upsets people a lot. Because, it's kind of a, it's a concept that we have been trying to live with for a long time, and we've tried to live with it, not too happily and it often isn't too comfortable, ah, to live with any more as a *concept*. See. What do you mean, interior life? See. Ah, for a lot of us interior life, from having been talked about in this *reflex* sort of way, see, where you go up, you, you meet something in the interior life itself, see. And you back away from it and you stand over here and you look at it, in the light of some other standard of judgement, see. What is it? Shall I accept it or shall I not accept it? Is it, is it the goods or isn't it? See. Well this shouldn't be. So therefore this inner, inwardness of Rilke is going to be something that is going to be *useful* for us to know about. See, interior life is what happens when you come alive in contact with reality. That's what interior life *is*, see. You do not come in contact with God except through realities which he, by which he mediates to you, see. The only place where you come in contact with God without any kind of mediation whatever is in heaven, see. On earth, he mediates his, his, himself to you, see. And *most* of the time we come in contact with God through his creation, see. Ah, we've got the Church, we've got the sacraments and so forth, we'll leave that on the side for the moment because we're talking about a *poet*. But, if

you do not come *alive* in reaction to what you meet in your everyday life, you have no interior life. See. Consequently, if you try to build up an interior life which consists in *not* reacting to anything at all, see, you are going to have an interior *death*. See. And this isn't any fun to live with, it's *painful*. See. So you don't want this. So therefore in cultivating an interior life, it is good to be able to *re-act* to the good things that God has placed in his world and the good things that he has placed in the monastery and the, the things that are around us so that we *respond* to them, so that interior life therefore is primarily a fact of *response*. See. No response, no interior life. Full response, full interior life. See. Interior life is the capacity to respond. If you respond, you're alive, see. Now that's, that's the whole story. I mean that's, that's the meaning of vocation; vocation is *response*, response to a call, see. And so forth. Well now, how does this man Rilke *respond* to things? There are two ways in which these particular kinds of poets respond. [16'40"] And one of them is what you, one is not satisfactory, and the other is. It's what Rilke does. Now let's get back to the picture here. Well, here now this is the poet. Here's Rilke. There he is, see. And he now is at the zoo, let's say. And he's going to the zoo and he's going to see this, this other end, he's going to see a panther. So he writes this poem about the panther. Now, actually this whole poem about the panther when we come to it is about this relationship, see. And what it's mostly about is the fact that the panther at the other end is not interested in seeing anybody, see. And he is, this is more or less, here is this beast which is a, a prisoner. And has lost contact. Has, has *no*, is really only exteriorly alive, because it's a prisoner. It's in captivity. And *has no response*. Response has *died* in this animal. See. And here is the poet looking at this animal in whom response has died. But this animal is still physically alive and a beautiful animal and a beautiful creature of God. And here is this relationship. Now where does the poem occur? In the poet? In the animal? No. Where does it occur? Where does this poetic experience *really* occur? Yah? [*response*] In the poem. In the poem. In the work. So, let's put here then the *work* here. So, *now* you've got, the panther is giving *his* contribution and the author is giving *his* contribution and the *real thing* is *what takes place in the work*. See. Here is a *new creation*, a new being, which reflects not just the poet, not just the animal, but the encounter of the two. See. And this is the way all things are. And where the, the, the way, this is the way it should be and the way it shouldn't be is if the thing simply occurs in the poet, see. In

other words, the difference between great poetry and less great poetry is partly this. The great poet really gives you a poem, about which, which stands in its own right and which is *real*, see. It's a reality, it speaks of this encounter with life. And the less, the less great poet simply tells you how he feels about it. See. So therefore, Rilke gives you a poem, "The Panther," which is a complete panther, see. It's a creation of a panther. And somebody else will give you a poem about how I felt when I was at the zoo and I saw the panther, see. Which is like we used to write in the sophomore high school, see: "This is the way I felt when I was at the zoo." See. So, now let's, since time's a-wasting. Let's hit a poem.... [19'41"]



The memorial at 'Fourth and Walnut' in Louisville. photograph by GPH (2011)

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