

# Question and Revelation: Thomas Merton's Recovery of the Ground of Birth

by  
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Thomas Merton - famous writer, noted spiritual master - lived as a monk of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (or Trappists) at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, Kentucky, for twenty-seven years. For most of that time he was a kind of hermit *wannabe*, a man seeking to live in ever greater solitude. In the last three years of his life - from 1965 to 1968 - he was allowed to live at Gethsemani in partial solitude. In those three years especially, Thomas Merton's own contemplative life had far-reaching implications.

In this period Merton rehearsed the geography of his own spiritual and physical journeys, seeking the ground of birth as he relived his own experience. In rendering the sayings of Taoist Master Chuang Tzu, Merton interpreted one line as: "The birth of a man is the birth of his sorrow." On 24 January 1966, one week before his fifty-first birthday, Merton wrote these plangent words in his journal: "I realized today after Mass what a desperate, despairing childhood I had around the age of seven - nine - ten, when Mother was dead and Father was in France and Algeria." Elsewhere he referred to his "lost childhood." Anthony Padovano has said that this "lost childhood" was "the object of his yearning."

The search for the ground of birth, of the ground of his own being, became a major thread in the fabric of his contemplative life. In an untitled poem, written in 1966 during his involvement with the nurse, he speaks of how we move, almost automatically, from the ground of our birth, from our original unity with God and all created things. He wrote:

All theology is a kind of birthday  
Each one who is born  
Comes into the world as a question  
For which old answers  
Are not sufficient.

Birth is question and revelation  
The ground of birth is paradise  
Yet we are born a thousand miles  
Away from our home.  
Paradise weeps in us  
And we wander further away.  
This is the theology of our birthdays.

He concludes the poem:

No one ever got born  
All by himself: It takes more than one.  
Every birthday  
Has its own theology.

Writing from his monastery on the fringes of society, he engaged issue after issue, seeing them with a clarity - at times a frightening clarity for one supposedly removed from the mainstream - which enables us to grasp the root and cause of so many problems even if we, like him, cannot always find solution and resolution.

It is obvious that Merton - to borrow a phrase from Marsha Sinetar's book, *Reel Power: Spiritual Growth through Film* - had "unfinished childhood business" to pursue. Though Merton certainly chose mechanisms other than film to pursue this "business," there is definitely something filmic about his story as it unfolds. Patrick Reilly of Glasgow University has remarked that the story, in fact, "reads like the scenario of a tinseltown script with all the necessary best-selling ingredients." I would go further and say that there is more than a little of the "soap opera" in Merton's story though, as we shall see, Merton himself edits out some of the "drama." Quite a bit gets left "on the cutting room floor." In any case, even if the pursuit was never necessarily complete, it was, for Merton, completely necessary. I wish here to examine one aspect of that "unfinished childhood business."

Merton has become a guide for us about so many questions that it is not surprising to find him involved in a conundrum which pervades our twentieth century literature - *the search for the father*. He captures for us, once again, as he relates his own story the *zeitgeist* of our time. He mirrors the disquietude, the restlessness, even the rootlessness of the century. Like William Faulkner, Chaim Potok, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Robert Anderson, and so many others, Merton was engaged in a search for his father. With these other writers, he wanted "more from him, more of him." These lines spoken by the character Gene Garrison in Robert Anderson's play, *I Never Sang for My Father*, echo the Merton pursuit: "Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward some resolution, which it never finds . . . But, *still*, when I hear the word 'Father'!" Merton wanted more even after his father's death - which did not provide closure, which did not end the relationship for the son, which left an emptiness he could never fill. He becomes a companion along the way for all of us struggling to make sense of our relationships with our fathers.

Merton grasped, with mingled joy and pain, that he and his father were "in each other all along." And he further grasped that the search for his father was, as it invariably must be, a search for himself. What comes through in Merton is that the struggle isn't easy. Where there is pain, it may be too much to bear, far too much to express. We may be unable to separate what we want our fathers to be from what our fathers *are* or *were*. He once remarked: "Most men cannot live fruitfully without a large proportion of fiction in their thinking." As he engaged in the search for his

father, Merton's experience reminds us over and over again, that a certain amount of "fiction" may influence and colour the search. The answers we find may be no answers - either because we cannot see the answers or because we reject the answers or because the answers fail to fit the "scenario" we are limning of ourselves and our fathers. We may go looking for one thing and find another. We always want "more" somehow and so we may, as Merton did, go looking for something and find it because that is what has impelled our search.

Thomas Merton entered Gethsemani at age twenty-six, fifty-two days short of his twenty-seventh birthday. The date was 10th December 1941. Twenty-seven years to the day later - fifty-two days short of his fifty-fourth birthday - he died in Bangkok, Thailand, on 10th December 1968. His life divided - quite neatly, almost too neatly in fact - in half, one half before the monastery and one half in the monastery. It has been pointed out, frequently and often tiresomely so, that to understand Merton and his place in the experience of our century, we must understand monasticism and the monastic structure which gave discipline and substance to his writings and to half of his life. Certainly !! No can deny that. The monastic structure is important in understanding Merton, but it is also important to know why and how that structure worked for him. He brought a great deal of "baggage" into the monastery with him, and what he "unpacks" in his writings - about human values, human relationships, human aspirations, even about monasticism itself - comes from deep-seated feelings inside him, feelings instilled in the half of his life before he was a monk. Nexus after nexus connect the two halves of Merton's life.

Clues to Thomas Merton lie in his father's story. Owen Heathcote Grierson Merton was born in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1887, and died in London in 1931. His story is as palpable to the twentieth century as is his son's for it, too, is a story (as Clare Boothe Luce put it) of "what went on in the hearts of humans in this cruel century." We have a staggering amount of autobiographical material which the son produced about himself. Owen didn't write about himself *per se*, but a surprising amount of material about him has survived in letters, in biographical novels, in accounts by people he knew. As Thomas Merton searched for his father, he may not have known that so much material existed - had survived - about Owen. The son had not, partially because he simply wasn't there, been privy to a lot of information. The search, then, was impelled in part because he didn't know a great deal about his father and he wanted to know more, to have more. In a 1957 letter to A. A. MacGregor (biographer of Owen's art teacher, Percyval Tudor-Hart), for instance, he couldn't remember when his father was born.

Nevertheless, Owen Merton had bequeathed a great deal to his son - a certain way of looking at the world, a certain self-contradiction, a predilection for a particular lifestyle, a commitment and dedication to "vocation." He also bequeathed pain and *angst*. While pain and *angst* may inevitably be part of the father's bequest and may just as inevitably be a catalyst in the son's search, Thomas Merton is more interested in the "positive" parts of his father's bequest. Where he expresses pain or

despair or other emotion, as in the quotation at the beginning of this essay, it is more the pain of *not* being with his father. It is rarely the pain of *what* his father may have done or failed to do. It is never the pain of blaming his father for the bad things in his life. The search for Owen Merton is not that kind of search.

Owen Merton's life, like his son's, divides in half: he was in New Zealand basically until he was twenty-two (1909) and he spent the latter twenty-two years (1909 to 1931) in Europe, America, and Africa. He thought of himself as a *painter*, in much the same way his son would later think of himself as a *writer*. Owen died of a brain tumour in a London hospital when his son was sixteen. It had been a long, drawn out illness, and his death came after some years of increasingly erratic behavior (caused in part, no doubt, by the brain tumour). At the end he was unable to speak though he had moments, his son tried to believe, of lucidity. On 20 January 1931, the day of his father's funeral, young Tom Merton wrote to Percyval Tudor-Hart:

I naturally will feel his absence greatly, for he was always so awfully good and kind to me, and we enjoyed life so much together in the South of France. I cannot quite accustom myself to the knowledge that he and I shall never visit our old haunts together anymore.

This short note contains many clues. Tom enjoyed their life together. He wanted to be with his father. He wanted to pal around with him. Owen left and it is his absence that gives pain. What comes through - in this note and later - is that Tom Merton saw his father as a kind of buddy, someone to knock about with. Owen was not paternal in the usual sense of the word nor was he much of an authority figure to or for his son. Owen once wrote: "He is exactly like his mother in most ways, which means I am a bloody fool to him, except when my foolishness is thought interesting by authority, then I must be wonderful." Owen does not appear in his son's accounts as a domineering, tyrannical father - not as one whose authority was exercised or heeded (as authority). That was not Owen's paternal style. He felt (as had Tom's mother) that their son must be independent, learning to live and to think for himself. Owen had written earlier: "Tom is good about understanding he has to look after himself. He always cries when he gets the importance of something I lecture him about." There are other reports that Tom Merton cried when told what to do (are there shades here of his later chafing at times against abbatial authority?). He was described as "intractable" and Owen's mistress, Evelyn Scott (of whom more later), remarked: "Tom is and will be until he is big enough to be set adrift a constant obstacle to piece [sic] of mind."

Owen stated about Tom: "It came on him all of a heat when he got away from me, that I was pretty good to him." Echoes of this appear in Tom's statement to Tudor-Hart that his father was "always so awfully good and kind" to him. He never wavered in this judgment. He later said: "My father wanted to [take] care of me, but he did not precisely know how." He didn't know how! What does this mean? Was it that Owen didn't know how, or was it that he didn't take care of his son as his

son saw other fathers doing, or was it that he didn't take care of his son as his son wanted? Is what we are to see unfold in the son a kind of repentance for recalcitrance while his father lived, an apology for not appreciating Owen while he was alive? Can this explain why Owen's good intentions come to loom larger than his failures?

Something was left unsaid, unspoken, between father and son. Selima Hill, daughter of Owen's friend, James Wood, has noted: "He didn't tell his son he was dying." Is it possible that Owen, remembering Tom's reaction when his mother told him she was dying in a letter, feared to tell his son? Or, did Owen's illness make him *non compos* before he was able to tell his son? The possibility of Owen's death only came clear to Tom when he visited him in hospital in the summer of 1930. It had been several months since he had seen his father. He later said: "... when I saw him, I knew there was no hope of his living much longer." But, by that time, Owen could no longer talk. Whatever may have been left unsaid – because saying was impossible – in Owen's last months started his son toward a resolution of his relationship with his father in which Owen becomes larger than life, a Hollywood-type film hero. In 1933, when he was eighteen, Tom wrote again to Tudor-Hart:

I wish my brother [John Paul Merton, 1918-1943] or myself had inherited even a small part of our father's genius.

Geniuses are often allowed behavior which is not brooked in lesser people and Thomas Merton, it seems, made such allowances for his father. Years later in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he attributed even more extraordinary qualities to his father. "[His] was a great soul, large, full of natural charity. He was a man of exceptional intellectual honesty and sincerity and purity of understanding." In writing of his father's death, he said:

Here was a man with a wonderful mind and a great talent and a great heart: and what was more, he was the man who had brought me into the world, and nourished me and cared for me and had shaped my soul and to whom I was bound by every possible kind of bond of affection and attachment and admiration and reverence.

Thomas Merton was not ready for the relationship to end and parting was painful. An aside in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, prompted by Tom's visit to his father in hospital, gives us a quick glimpse of the pain. The aside is about suffering, but the suffering is as much Tom's interior pain as it is Owen's physical pain.

The one who does the most to avoid suffering is, in the end, the one who suffers most: and his suffering comes from things so little and so trivial that one can say that it is no longer objective at all. It is his own existence, his own being, that is at once the subject and the source of his pain, and his very existence and consciousness is his greatest torture.

Was Merton his own prophet here? Did he try to avoid "suffering" – the pain of separation from his father? At fifty-one he still felt the pain of what he called

his "lost childhood." A year after that he could write to his friend Edward Rice: "You think I no got angst? Man, think again. I got angst up to the eyes!" Did he continue to suffer in the search for his father and himself? Did he suffer because he tried to avoid suffering? Was the overblown view of Owen in his public pronouncements at variance with what he felt within himself? Did he fictionalize Owen, writing a "scenario" for himself and others? Is this why Merton never faced certain facts about Owen in his writings? Did he deliberately set out to edit from his accounts of his father anything that was negative? Anything that caused him to suffer?

The answer would seem to be both "yes" and "no". Thomas Merton does not tell us everything about his father (or his mother), but what he does tell us is not, to him at any rate, fiction. His view of his father's legacy to him is not a distortion. To realize why it is not distorted, we must go back to who and what Owen Merton was. Thomas Merton was proud of his parents, proud of who he thought they were, proud of the fact that they were artists, proud of the fact that they had not "run with the herd" – many of the qualities that would later be attributed by others to him. He said: "Being the son of an artist, I was born the sworn enemy of anything that could obviously be called 'bourgeois'". His good friend – some say his best friend – Robert Lax has commented:

I certainly got the impression that he liked and admired his father, & liked his paintings. That he liked his mother's paintings too . . . I think that Merton liked being the son of two artists & being an artist himself. (I feel now he felt he was part of a tribe, and knew where he belonged in it.) Some of our gang, not I but others, felt more like changelings in their families. Couldn't imagine how they could have been born to parents so unlike themselves. Not Merton.

Owen and Ruth Jenkins Merton (1887-1921) were bohemians of the first water, part of that complex of artists and writers who wafted through London, Paris, and Greenwich Village before, during and after the First World War, and who would be dubbed by Gertrude Stein part of "a lost generation". Owen and Ruth thought of themselves as artists and they were both, studiously and intentionally, "marginal persons". This was to leave deep and pervasive influences in their son. He wrote:

After all, from my very childhood, I had understood that the artistic experience, at its highest, was actually a natural analogue of mystical experience. It produced a kind of intuitive perception of reality. . . . I had learned from my own father that it was almost blasphemy to regard the function of art as merely to reproduce some kind of a sensible pleasure or, at best, to stir up emotions to a transitory thrill. I had always understood that art was contemplation, and that it involved the action of the highest faculties of [humans].

Ruth Jenkins, an American, was self-consciously "daring". She had gone to Paris, alone and unchaperoned, to study art (hardly the thing for a well-brought-up young woman to do in 1909). There she met and fell in love with Owen Merton. Both



tried to assure their anxious families that there was no cause for alarm, but what the families feared did happen: Owen and Ruth lived together before their marriage. They preferred the company of artists and writers whom they considered *avant-garde*, who espoused ideas and techniques congenial with their own. They, too, were searching – and they did not look to traditional values as final answers, in life style or in art. Merton gave a rare insight into this aspect of his parents when he wrote in 1965:

[Rabindranath] Tagore is the kind of writer whom my Father and Mother admired and whom I therefore grew up to respect. . . . Why was Tagore popular with my parents' generation? Because so many of them were open to the East without knowing precisely what they were open to. They wanted some Eastern figure with whom they could to some extent identify themselves, and Tagore made a definite enough impression to fill this role admirably for the West. Hence his popularity, and hence the readiness of Europe of the turn of the century and World War I to listen to him with reverence as a spokesman of Asia.

What his parents respected, he respected. They were open to new ideas and to areas ordinary people – “the bourgeoisie” – were not. Though he respected his mother as an artist, the picture he paints of her is much harsher than the one of Owen. Yet he does not relate that her New York neighbors found her “weird”. She dressed and moved “artistically” and, it has been said, people avoided engaging her in conversation as she walked through the neighborhood because she expressed ideas which seemed far-out and unconventional. She was apparently a person who could provoke embarrassment in others. And she had decidedly “modern ideas” about child rearing. What came through to her young son, in her desire to make him his own person, was that she was demanding. She *expected* a great deal from him, more in fact than he later felt he was able to deliver. In his late poem *Cables to the Ace*, he asks a mother (*his mother?*): “What do you teach me? What do you want of me? What do you seek of me?”

Ruth Jenkins Merton died of stomach cancer at Bellevue Hospital in New York in 1921. Her older son was six-and-a-half years old. To the end she “expected” things of Tom. She wrote him a letter telling him she was dying and expected him to understand. He didn't. Despite social practice which kept children isolated from dying and death, despite hospital rules which proscribed visits by children his age, he blamed his mother for writing him a letter and he never forgave her for not telling him in person that she was dying. It left deep scars in young Tom and the pain was to emerge in different ways for the rest of his life. The usual interpretation has been that Ruth's death ended “family life” for Owen, Tom, and John Paul – that her death started Tom on the lonely path of “lost childhood” and plunged him into a knock-about existence. It surely did in many ways, but things had not been settled and smooth before her death.

At eighteen months little Tom had been uprooted from his birthplace in the south of France (he was later to say “I am mortally homesick for the South of France,

where I was born”) and the small family fled to the United States. Tom was born in Prades, “in a year of a great war”, as he put it. Owen and Ruth had gone to the south of France, ostensibly to paint, but also because they could live there on next to nothing. But World War I was raging and, as the war encroached and as their ‘pacifist’ feelings made them reject the idea of Owen's being pressed into the French army, they decided to leave France. They managed to secure passage from Bordeaux in July, 1916.

In the United States they tried to avoid taking money from Ruth's affluent American parents. But Sam and Martha Jenkins (“Pop” and “Bonnamaman” to Tom), anxious over the welfare of their grandsons, often underwrote the finances of the little household. This only increased tension and conflict in a family already afflicted with tension and conflict. Tom later wrote: “Our family had been one of those curious modern households in which everybody was continually arguing and fighting, and in which there had been for years an obscure and complicated network of contentions and suppressed jealousies”. Sam Jenkins didn't much like Owen Merton, nor did Ruth's unmarried brother Harold who still lived at home with his parents. Owen didn't seem interested in “work” as Sam defined it though he did try various things to make a living. It was simply never the kind of living Sam Jenkins found appropriate. Things weren't without conflict on Owen's side of the family either. His mother (in New Zealand) had had extreme doubts about the regularity of his relationship with Ruth – despite remonstrances to her from both of them. It was reported that Ruth was “*not* good friends” with Owen's sister, Gwynedd Merton Trier (1885-1986), who had followed her brother to England and who was later to clash with Owen when she insisted that Tom be allowed to live with her and her family in order to “regularize” his living arrangements. When Owen's mother, Gertrude Grierson Merton (1855-1956), visited on Long Island in 1919, she was not delighted by what she found. Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* finds it telling that something seems amiss in the family photographs taken during the visit, that Tom in particular is scowling and seems, at age four, unhappy with the proceedings.

Owen and Ruth continued to pursue their “art”, and continued to associate with “artistic types”. They knew or met several denizens of Greenwich Village and New York, such as Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe, Marianne Moore, Djuna Barnes, Lola Ridge, Kay Boyle, and others. Owen managed to exhibit some paintings, including a small show at Stieglitz's “291 Gallery” in 1920. But he didn't make any money and this consternated Sam Jenkins. (Tom was later to portray his grandfather as a blustery, though amiable and somewhat silly, Babbitt type of American.) Through it all Owen reiterated to his in-laws and others: “... painting is the only thing I want to do. ... it takes all I have – and satisfies me – and I have no time to think of anything else.” The chronology is hard to follow, but it is clear that Owen was gone from his family, pursuing his art, a great deal of the time. There are strong hints that the marriage may have been headed for divorce when Ruth was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Even then, Owen was away much of the time. He

was in England through much of her illness. As late as July 1921 (three months before her death), he was teaching art classes outside London. He was in New York when she died and his son recorded that he wept. But then comes one of the most curious passages in *The Seven Storey Mountain* :

Mother's death had made one thing clear: Father did not now have to do anything but paint. He was not tied down to any one place. He could go wherever he needed to go, to find subjects and get ideas, and I was old enough to go with him.

Curious, yes. Unfeeling, even more so ! Is this the payback for expectations which had been too much for Ruth Merton's son ? She had become an encumbrance to Owen and his 'vocation'. Her death liberated both father and son. Here we find with emphasis the major key to Tom Merton's continuing search for his father: he wanted to be with him ! Ruth's death, he thought, enabled it. The passage also exonerates Owen from responsibility for stability in his sons' lives. He is exculpated from the post-Industrial revolution role of the father as 'provider'. Tom, like Owen, was more than willing to let Sam Jenkins pay the bills – while deriding him as crass and materialistic and, yes, bourgeois. Tom could even excuse his father's absences due to his 'business' of painting. It was not, he says, always possible for him to be with Owen, but this, he also says, did not bother him. No, even in his later search, though desperate and despairing and anxious to be with his father, the son sees his father's commitment to painting as a valid, legitimate, spirit-based *vocation* !

So, in Thomas Merton's 'scenario', the knock-about existence of the next few years makes sense. He was to say more than once that he accepted with equanimity anything his father did or did to him. As we shall see, he was not always so equable as he later pretended. He could accept being dragged here and there by his father. That gave him freedom and got him away from the tense atmosphere of his grandparents' home, though he could even accept being deposited for periods with them. He could accept, with remarkable composure, Owen's abandoning him in Massachusetts in 1923. But he could not accept – and would not accept – his father's affair with novelist Evelyn Scott.

Tom had been delivered from one woman - his mother - whom he saw as austere, dominating, demanding. Even at age seven, he was not about to come under the control of another such woman – a woman who wasn't even his mother ! It would probably have been much the same story with any woman Owen met since Tom didn't want to share his father, but Evelyn Scott was, from all reports, even more demanding than Ruth had been. In the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Owen becomes after Ruth's death a kind of contemplative *manqué* to his son, a man devoted to his art. Yet this is somewhat at variance with the facts before about 1926 (if after then !).

Tom knew – what child wouldn't ? – that his father wanted for years to marry Evelyn and make her his stepmother. We glean nothing from the son about this: about his father's having an affair, about his desire to remarry, about his sexual being. Granted, like many sons (and daughters, too), Thomas Merton may have had

problems admitting that his father was a sexual being. He may have had little knowledge of his father's sexuality. Some of what he might have known, I suspect he would have rejected – that his father had had homosexual experiences and that he was certainly bisexual. At age seven he may not have realized in Bermuda – where Owen dragged him in 1922 – that his father was actually sleeping with Evelyn and with her common-law husband, Cyril Kay Scott. (Owen tried to 'protect' Tom from the milieu by lodging him, for a time, alone in a boarding house across the island.) But Evelyn's son Creighton – the same age as Tom – grasped then or later what was going on and recorded with great repugnance facts about the *ménage à trois* in his unpublished autobiography, *Confessions of an American Boy*.

Merton was later to say: "That beautiful island [Bermuda] fed me with more poisons than I have a mind to stop and count". There was some good reason why he made this remark and it was almost certainly pointed in some way toward Evelyn and the *ménage*. We gain clues from a lengthy aside, a sermon really, which was cut from the published version of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The passage is convoluted, full of suggestion and pious mutterings, but one can sense resentment and hurt in it as well.

What a terrible thing is the plasticity and gentleness of the mind of a child ! How quickly it takes on shapes and forms of distortion ! With what simplicity and love it welcomes disorder and accepts disfigurement ! How hard it is for the most careful and conscientious parents to foresee all the unsuspected occasions when sickness and corruption can seep into a child's soul ! Sometimes they themselves are the cause of what they would give their lives to prevent, by some word or gesture or an action which perhaps because of some completely subjective context in the child's own mind, something that utterly avoids detection and diagnosis, turns into a seed of one of the deadly sins....

When I think of my own childhood, and of the love and conscientiousness of my Father, and his well-meaning desires to bring me up an intelligent and happy person: and when I think how completely impossible it was for him to succeed, under the circumstances in which he had placed himself and me, I cease to wonder at the wars and the crimes that have filled this century with blood. Because of all the millions of children that have been born and have grown up in it, how few have reached maturity under the constant protection of religion and grace, and how many have grown like weeds on any dung they could find to put their roots in ! ...

When I was eight years old, running loose among the rocks and the prickly pears of Somerset Island, Bermuda, I was in just about the same position as the child of divorced parents ....

Thomas Merton refers to the Scotts as "some people he [Owen] had met". Later he calls them Owen's "friends, who were literary people and artists". And thus, he dispensed with Evelyn. She was a difficult person, but she found young Tom equally difficult. She wrote to her friend Lola Ridge: "Tom is a morbid and possessive kid and Owen is made morbid about Tom through various things that

occurred in connection with Ruth". After she and Owen finally separated in 1926, she wrote: "Little Tom hated me. What was there to do?" Owen himself admitted after the affair had ended: "I know I could not have reconciled the children and the question of either living with or marrying Evelyn. Tom's jealousy and irreconcilableness are perfectly enormous."

Young Tom Merton did not want his father to remarry. He didn't want a stepmother, a rival for his father's affection and attention. He especially didn't want any such woman telling him what to do (Creighton recorded that Owen left all 'discipline' to Evelyn) and getting in the way of the life he wanted to live with Owen. Evelyn may not have been particularly nice to Tom (she supposedly wouldn't let him mention his dead mother), but he was reported as being 'devilish' toward her. He may have known, as well, that he had allies in his grandparents and uncle who strongly disliked Evelyn (though he may not have known that they referred to her as "the whore"). While his role in 'eliminating' Evelyn at the time makes sense, his subsequent public elimination of her from his life and his father's raises several questions.

What nine or ten year old boy forgets the woman who might have been his stepmother, especially when he had lived with her for a considerable time? Why would such a woman, no matter how much she was hated, *not* be mentioned in an autobiography hailed as "candid, revealing, and utterly honest?" But the elimination of Evelyn goes even beyond that: Merton never - anywhere - mentions her by name. Robert Lax has said: "If I heard anything of father's lady-friend (and I must have) - it surely wasn't much." For some time I thought that the hatred and pain ran so deep in Thomas Merton that he could not, even years later, face the spectre of Evelyn Scott. That may be true to an extent, but I now suspect it was something in addition to the hatred and pain that caused him to edit Evelyn Scott out of his life and out of his autobiography. She didn't fit into his "search for his father" as the story was unfolding in his version.

Now I play with a scenario like this: isn't it likely that young Tom Merton, who was from all reports a precocious and unusually sophisticated boy, knew that Evelyn Scott was a novelist? The fact that he refers to her and to Cyril Kay Scott as "literary people" suggests he did know. Knowing this, might he not in 1933 at age eighteen have recognized her name and picked up a copy of her novel, *Eva Gay*, which was published that year? If he did, it wouldn't have taken Tom Merton long to realize that much of *Eva Gay* is a thinly disguised biography of Owen Merton. He would have realized that Evelyn's painter, Evan Garrett, was his father and the dowdy and complaining wife, Louise, was his mother - and that *Eva Gay* is really Evelyn herself. The novel would, no doubt, have shocked young Tom. He would certainly have rejected the description of his father as "a fumbling, brutal, and fragmentary man." In fact, he would probably have rejected nearly *all* that Evelyn had to say about Owen. One can imagine - in this scenario - his hatred for Evelyn rekindling.

His father, his wonderful father, had died and he had now been betrayed by this harridan of a woman. If he also happened to read Evelyn's *Bread and a Sword*,

published in 1937, it would have compounded things. It is also based, though more loosely, on Owen Merton's life as an artist. It is as D. A. Callard, biographer of Evelyn Scott (*Pretty Good for a Woman*), puts it, "a story of economic necessity versus artistic integrity." Owen Merton is Alexander Williams, whose marriage collapses because he cannot support his family. His wife dies and by the end of the book, he is "hopelessly compromised and defeated." Tom had, by this time, fallen under the spell of Mark Van Doren at Columbia University - a man who remained a mentor for the rest of his life. Did he know and did he read the review of *Bread and a Sword* written by Van Doren's wife, Dorothy? Did he read her words (though she would not have known they referred to Tom Merton's father): "Mrs. Scott does not convince us that her artist is worth saving?"

If he read these novels, one can imagine that he would not have wanted anyone else to know that Evelyn's unflattering depictions were of his father. Her portrayals didn't square with his developing view of his father. And so, Evelyn had to go! When he came to write his autobiography (and even his later writings), I find it reasonable to assume that he feared to mention her by name lest it lead people to her novels. He needn't have feared, but he couldn't have guessed that Evelyn would be a quickly forgotten novelist (forgotten actually by the time he wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*) and that her books would not be much read. The connection with Evelyn Scott was not discovered, in fact, until a dozen or so years after Thomas Merton's own death. Perhaps he couldn't have guessed that Owen Merton's presence in the papers of Evelyn herself (Texas), Lola Ridge (Smith), Louis Theis (Yale), and others would reveal it all. But, for Merton, once Evelyn was eliminated, once she was reduced to an anonymous and innocuous footnote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it no doubt became easier to ignore her in subsequent writings. I doubt, though, that he ever managed to eliminate her from his private thoughts, any more than his father managed to dispel her from his.

The Bermuda *ménage* ended in the spring of 1923. Owen, Evelyn, Cyril and Creighton left in late summer for Europe. Thomas Merton later wrote: "I was deposited of all places, in the house of a very rich lady at Buzzard's Bay, in Massachusetts." That didn't last long. Sam Jenkins was summoned by the "rich lady" to fetch Tom back to Long Island. He lived there with his grandparents until August, 1925. He may have felt at age fifty-one that these years with his grandparents were a time of despair, but he was wary when Owen returned from Europe in June, 1925. He recorded: "As he landed in New York, he was a very different person - more different than I realized - from the man who had taken me to Bermuda two years before."

Merton doesn't tell us exactly how Owen was different, but Owen himself said he was "in a violently hysterical condition." He had, a year before, suffered a strange illness. It was thought he was dying. The irrationality which he displayed during the illness was undoubtedly a precursor of his subsequent brain tumour. Yet we don't see in the son's account Owen as he was at the time: still weak from illness, undernourished, strained in body and soul, exhausted from the affair with Evelyn and



from years of living in poverty. No, Tom only tells us he had grown a beard – and Tom didn't like it! Owen had come to make a last ditch effort to reconcile his in-laws to a possible marriage with Evelyn, to extract funds from them so he could live and paint, to take his sons back to Europe with him. The Jenkins family was as wary as Tom and, as things developed, they were not receptive to Owen's plans.

Michael Mott reports that “there was a bitter and angry dispute between Owen and Sam Jenkins, with Harold Jenkins now taking a strong part against Owen.” The basic problem was Evelyn. Sam refused to finance any arrangement which included her. She wrote to Lola Ridge: “If Tom is to live with him [Owen], he and I, living together would need to marry at once. If we married at once there would be no help whatever from Jenkins or people here [London].” It was clear that Sam Jenkins wanted the relationship regularized if Tom was to live again with Owen, but he wouldn't provide money if Owen married Evelyn. Tom himself wasn't happy: he didn't want to go to Europe and he certainly wanted no arrangement which included Evelyn. As Sam Jenkins stood firm, Owen said: “I just busted !” The situation came to a head at the Jenkins' summer home in Ashuelot, New Hampshire, when Owen attempted to commit suicide. Though Owen was obviously unstable, the incident swayed Sam Jenkins. If Owen ended the affair with Evelyn and agreed not to see her again, Sam would give him an allowance, let him take Tom back to Europe with him, and pay for Tom's schooling. Though Owen had mentioned ‘children’ in his letters, Sam and Martha Jenkins did not allow John Paul to go with Owen and Tom.

Thomas Merton was later to say of going to France with his father: “It really saved me !” The obvious conclusion is that, as he looked back, he found life with Owen more “nourishing” than life with his grandparents would have been. But was he with Owen ? At first he was at school in St. Antonin, but living with his father who wrote: “He depends on me very much”. Owen was already looking forward to a time when Tom could be left elsewhere. That time came soon. He was packed off to a lycée at Montauban. In 1967 he reminisced: “Entering [the Lycée] as far as I could see at that time was about equivalent to entering Sing Sing.” He was hustled off during the next summer to live with a French peasant family, the Privats (he later learned that this was because he ostensibly had a touch of tuberculosis). He was jerked from the Lycée in 1928 and taken to England where he was dumped on Owen's aunt and uncle, Maud and Benjamin Pearce, and then, as in France, packed off to boarding school. He was never really to ‘live’ with his father again.

After 1926 Owen withdrew into self-imposed solitude. He wanted, again, to devote himself to his painting. He wrote to Evelyn: “I think I had better stay quietly by myself for a long time.” It is at this point that we can see parallels between Owen's life and Tom's life as the son related it in his writings. Father and son both engaged in ‘illicit’ (did they believe ‘sordid’) sexual escapades. Both came to see such involvement as detrimental to themselves, their spirits, and their vocations. Both came to see sexual abstinence as necessary to their lives. Both withdrew to the fringes of society – Owen to the French countryside, Tom to the knobs of Kentucky. Owen called the house which he started to build at St. Antonin his ‘hermitage’. Tom

was to call at least two places at Gethsemani his ‘hermitage’. But Owen's solitude was not long lasting and it may have been no more eremitical than his son's. Illness struck again and he died in 1931. At sixteen, Tom's struggle to ‘find’ his father had begun.

The story, as the search progresses, is a positive one. The important period to the son is the one in which his father lived in solitude and pursued his art. Little bitterness - about anything - surfaces through the years. No, Owen was responsible for Tom Merton's becoming the person he became. It was Owen's ideas and spirit which “shaped” his son's soul. For this the son was grateful. And, in his gratitude – his affection, attachment, admiration, and reverence – he tried constantly to convey what a good artist his father was. But beyond the fact that an artist father inspired an artist son, Owen was instrumental in starting Tom on the path of finding himself and his God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Owen becomes, as D.A. Callard puts it, “the lodestar of his life.” Anthony T. Padovano put it this way: “Merton's entire adult life is a search for artistic and spiritual excellence, one sustaining the other, both converging into a striking unity, each initiated by his father.” Merton himself said:

Of us all, Father was the only one who really had any kind of a faith. And I do not doubt that he had very much of it, and that behind the walls of his isolation, his intelligence and his will, unimpaired, and not hampered in any essential way by the partial obstruction of some of his senses, were turned to God, and communed with God Who was with him and in him.

To Merton, his father was a religious man, and he died, in his son's view, in a state of grace. Yet, this was said of a man who had agreed with his wife to give his son no religious training – this of a man whose own mother was shocked to find in 1919 that her four year old grandson had never heard ‘The Lord's Prayer’ – this of a man who wrote in 1926 that if there were a *just* God “I could believe in him.” Despite this, Owen was to do even more for his son. He was to figure, after death, in his son's first real religious experience which took place in Rome in 1933. Merton related:

I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly I was overwhelmed with a sudden and profound insight into the misery and corruption of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in . . . . And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray . . . . There were a lot of tears connected with this and they did me good, and all the while, although I had lost that first vivid, agonizing sense of the presence of my father in the room, I had him in my mind, and I was talking to him as well as to God, as though he were a sort of intermediary . . . . whether it was imagination or nerves or whatever else it may have been, I can say truly that I did feel, most vividly, as if my father were present there, and the consequences that I

have described followed from this, as though he had communicated to me without words an interior light from God, about the condition of my own soul.

After this experience, the search for Owen Merton continued - even if expression of it was intermittent. In April, 1939, Merton returned to Bermuda. Was the trip supposed to be a cathartic one? Robert Lax said some years later that it was a David Copperfield kind of trip, one on which Merton "was mining the darkest things in his past." Yet, Merton's letter to Lax from Bermuda is enthusiastic, referring to where he had last lived with Owen: "Bermuda is the place in the world most like the South of France. It is, hear me, splendid!" And the poem he wrote while there, "Aubade: Bermuda," is a sunny, joyous little poem. Lax has more recently said: "He had a good feeling about Bermuda (which he passed on to me) - because he'd been there with his father." Where were the poisons in 1939 which surfaced by 1946?

The search merged and submerged after his entrance into Gethsemani into a search for a kind of spiritual father, a search which meshes of course with that for his physical father. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he returned to thoughts of the "lost father." He was, by that time, literally without immediate family. His American grandparents died in the late 1930s and his brother, John Paul, died in 1943 during World War II. His other grandmother died in New Zealand in 1956 - at the age of 101. He had been estranged from his uncle, Harold Jenkins, and from his British guardian's widow, Iris Weiss Bennett, for years. He began the attempt to re-establish contact with remaining family members in the United States, England, and New Zealand.

Some materials were sent to Merton at Gethsemani in this period. He was especially delighted with some letters written by his father. These letters renewed his interest and reconfirmed him in his opinion of Owen. His aunt, Gwynedd Merton Trier, sent two letters in 1966. He wrote to her:

... for a long time I have been thinking of looking into all that [finding Owen's paintings]. I never got down to doing anything about it ... Have you any notion where his paintings are? ... do you think there is any possibility of finding Father's pictures, if they survived the war, and doing something about them? Perhaps an exhibition could be arranged in this country and then those not sold could be placed somewhere where they could be seen.

There was a lot Thomas Merton didn't know: that his father had left forty paintings to Cyril Kay Scott, a number to the Bennetts, and had left over 150 in Tudor-Hart's possession (which ended up first in Canada and then in the United States). Several survived in New Zealand. One wonders why "Aunt Gwyn" failed to report that she had two or three.

Merton took one of the letters sent him by "Aunt Gwyn" and edited it for publication. He called it "Sincerity in Art and Life" and it was published in *Good Work*, the quarterly of the Catholic Art Association, in the spring of 1967. He remarked in his introductory note: "It is typical of my Father's outlook on art and on

life also, and expresses what seemed to him essential to 'good work.' " The letter confirmed Merton's impression of his father as a good and sincere and dedicated artist and it must definitely have confirmed - with its references to Christ - his view of his father as a spiritual, if not a religious, man. It must have reinforced the picture he had drawn of Owen nearly twenty years before in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He wrote again to "Aunt Gwyn":

If more of Father's letters turn up, please send me copies of the letters themselves if you can: I think they are well worth preserving and perhaps publishing in some way or other. Really it would be a pity to let all the good things he did be forgotten.

His New Zealand aunts also sent materials: early letters, clippings about Owen's exhibitions and his death, information about the Merton family. (One wonders how he would have reacted if he had 'discovered' any of Owen's frantic and gushy 'love letters' to Evelyn Scott! Would they have been 'worth' publishing?) He became interested in learning more about his father's family, and was particularly intrigued by the supposed Welsh connection (Wales figured prominently in his late poem, *Cables to the Ace*). Oddly, he displayed no interest in learning more about his mother's family, about his American forbears. Anthony Padovano has said:

His conversion begins when he senses his father's presence after death. As his life draws to a close, he searches again for that presence. His father has something to do with his artistic temperament, with the development of a religious instinct in him, with the conversion experience that begins his vocation, with the search for home and father culminating in Gethsemani, with the later poetry, and with an emptiness in him which nothing could satisfy.

We can learn from Merton's search though it is, in many ways, not a typical one. It was a search for presence, but it was not posited, despite pain that may have existed, in dwelling on bad things his father may have done to himself or to his son. It is not a search to recriminate. Merton does not, as so many twentieth century writers do, fulminate against his father nor does he wallow in the kind of anguish which stultifies and festers. Rather his search is to demonstrate (to himself and to others) the "good things" Owen did, the good things about him. Merton is responsible for himself, just as his father had been responsible for himself. In a reaction rare in our time, Merton is comfortable in emphasizing those good things, the qualities which contributed, for better or worse, to shaping his son. What matters to Merton is that his father had a vocation, a dedication to art, which allowed him, in his son's view, to integrate his person and his spirit. He wanted more, but it was the "more" of wanting to know more, to learn more from and about Owen. He wanted the world to see Owen as he saw him. The relationship never ended. Emptiness, a certain void, lingered on, yes, but Merton thought his father had shaped him and he loved him - and that was, for Merton, the important part.



It is this love that Merton called "the signature of God upon our being." On 13 April 1967 – about the same time his father's letter was published in *Good Work* – Merton wrote to his friend Amiya Chakravarty at Smith College where a "Merton Day" was being held. He said:

... the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.

We may never get all the way back to 'paradise,' to the ground of our birth, but we must certainly try. Four months later, in August, 1967, Merton wrote "A Letter on the Contemplative Life" – a letter formed and informed in part by his pursuit of "unfinished childhood business." Without the search for Owen Merton, he would not have written the following lines in quite the same way:

If we once begin to recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God in our being, the signature of God upon our being. Fortunately, the love of our fellow humans is given us as the way of realizing this. For the love of our brother, our sister, our beloved, our wife, our child, is there to see with the clarity of God Himself that we are good. It is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my child, my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty. The contemplative life is then the search for peace not in an abstract exclusion of all outside reality, not in a barren negative closing of the senses upon the world, but in the openness of love.

*(Unfortunately, Dr Daggy was unable to attend the conference.  
In his absence this paper was kindly read by George Kilcourse)*

