

# Reading Dante's *Commedia* in Merton's *Seven Storey Mountain*

by

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Merton's *Limbo & Inferno*: Part I & Part II of *Seven Storey Mountain*<sup>1</sup>

The perfect symmetry of the structure of Dante's *Commedia* becomes, in Thomas Merton's autobiography, the asymmetrical repetition and layering of the epic's main elements. Nevertheless, Merton has chosen Dante to be his Virgil, not personified but as an infused presence. It is not for the perfection of faith through poetry that Merton lives, unlike his mentor, but for the perfection of faith alone. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is mainly about Merton's discovery of the deep love and mercy of God, and its over-arching theme is the penance and gratitude of purgatory. Hell is a constantly recurring event in Parts I and II, and atonement is the goal of Part III, while paradise appears only briefly in the centre of his work. Overall, the *Commedia* depicts an orderly arrangement of human aspirations, actions, passions and attitudes. The talent of the poet ascending toward God, especially in *Paradiso*, praises God's supreme artistic creativity. But Merton is not so certain. He comes to eschew his ambition as a writer and poet, blaming these as the source of his pride - until he conceives of his talent and journey as serving God's will.

Dante's *Commedia* vitalizes the literal experience of sin, repentance and beatitude simultaneously with the symbolized vision of the condition of the soul after death. The constant flow of resemblances reinforces its moral imperative that salvation results from choices made during life. The allegorical continuation of sin in Hell, the redemptive purgatory, the Virgilian pastoral Earthly Paradise, and the linear planetary alignment of illuminated love are products of Dante-poet's imagination and all extend from the perspective of the paradisaical safe harbour and the intercessional benevolence of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The three capital vices of Dante's Hell are incontinence, violence and fraud. The penitents of Purgatory are distributed between distorted love, insufficient love, and excessive love. The blessed of Paradise are divided according to secular, active and contemplative love for God.

Thomas Merton first began reading Dante's *Commedia* while a student at Cambridge in the fall of 1933. He describes this class with Edward Bullough in *The Seven Storey Mountain* as his greatest positive-order grace from that year (pp.122-23, 242). Nevertheless, in the same passage Merton refers to his own "seven layers of imperviousness." Although Merton's direct references to Dante are scarce in his writings between 1939-1949, graduation to ordination, the fewest appear in the published versions of his autobiography. At the very crux of the story of his own pilgrimage to religious belief, however, Merton invokes an image of the shore at the

foot of the high, seven-circled mountain of an unexpectedly steep Purgatory (p.221). It is November 1938 and Merton is about to be baptized, for him the beginning of the climb. It is the literal and figurative center of the book, and the image behind it's title.

In Merton, the allegorical progression of Dante becomes the actual daily experiential, physically present progression of one man's interior journey toward home to God. Merton's journey is a process of becoming free of fear, in particular his awful fear of the loss of identity. This fear is closely connected to both of the world wars. In the opening paragraph Merton situates his birth in place and time, saying "That world was the picture of Hell." In 1915 World War I was being fought not far from where he was born, in the foothills of the French Pyrenees (p.3). More importantly, it was World War II from which he escaped when he entered the monastery which caused him great anguish on several accounts. Notably, his brother John Paul died fighting in that war.

During 1931-1934 in England, Merton's will had been bent by his godfather Dr. Tom Bennett which resulted in superficial sexual exploits, particularly during Merton's Cambridge days. This failure of love surely is the result of his mother's untimely death and of his father's subsequent inability to provide a stable relationship for his two sons during the ten years before his own untimely death. In any case, Merton's often-expressed fear of illness and of death can understandably be traced to the loss of his mother Ruth. She disappeared off the face of the earth to her six year old son Tom who was never given any hope of the possibility that her eternal soul would return to God. Merton may well have associated the burning damnation of Hell with the furnace of his mother's cremation, and thereby assimilated an inevitable sense of permanence to a death without resurrection.

### Merton's Conversion into Purgatory: Part II & Part III of *SSM*

Merton slowly discovered that the purgation of pride meant the submission in obedience to an authority, which at times he could neither respect nor understand, except as God's will and grace. This began in earnest in February, 1937, to satisfy what he calls the obscure need for faith, resulting in his baptism Nov. 16, 1938 (pp. 176, 223). However, before his baptism, at the age of 22, Merton suffers from nervous exhaustion. Overcome with vertigo on the Long Island train, he describes the episode saying it was as if he were about to plunge into a blind abyss, into emptiness. "Now my life was dominated by fear. . . . Like a cheap Prometheus, the eagle . . . was to eat out my insides for a year or so. . ." (p. 163). He writes of himself that "fear of being unlovable is inseparable from lust" and describes his anguish and distress as wounds: "I was bleeding to death" (p.163). Merton ends Part I on this bleak note of defeat in the fear of death, a reminder of a world that resembled Hell. But he says, "it was my defeat that was to be the occasion of my rescue" (p.165).

Merton begins Part II with the paradox that lies at the very heart of human existence: "Man's nature, by itself can do little or nothing to settle his most important problems. . . . Our nature, which is a free gift of God, requires something more, and

that is the gift of sanctifying grace (p. 169). Thus he answers the problem presented at the end of Part I. He describes it so: "When a ray of light strikes a crystal, it gives a new quality to the crystal. And when God's infinitely disinterested love plays upon a human soul, the same kind of thing takes place" (p. 170). Just as Merton notes that the Columbia University motto "In thy light, we shall see light" is about grace, so he seems to know that the light of human friendship was the chief means used by the Holy Spirit to illuminate his path at Columbia in 1936. There, his literature professor Mark Van Doren and his best friend Robert Lax are included with images of Elias, prophet and servant of God, and other saints and with Merton's own role as the equivocating Hamlet.

Throughout the following year, Merton reflects upon the general crisis of the world in response to Hitler, and his own personal misery along with his "revelation of the need for a spiritual life, an interior life" which would include "some kind of mortification" (p. 184). He notes, however, by way of admitting his misguided approach to that need, that he failed to confront his passions of lust and gluttony, "ones that really needed to be checked" (p.187). His relatively weak passions of anger and hatred, he claims, did not need the mortification he applied to them. Probably the most important point of this year was his decision to abandon his life long ambitions for fame, money and to be a journalist.

Merton's conversion begins to crystalize when he becomes "conscious of the fact that the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and reality of God" (p.191). Here Merton-poet interjects that while this says a great deal, it was only an intellectual realization and he is careful to explain that the life of the soul is not knowledge, it is love, and at this juncture his will is not yet united with God. Merton begins to realize that God's love requires him to set boundaries in his behavior and daily life.

The following spring, 1938, Merton re-discovers William Blake, and he writes, "from this distance, from this hill where I now stand, looking back I can really appreciate Blake's genius, holiness and greatness, his stature" (p. 190). Merton's "hill" here is not simply Columbia but it is also the situation from which Merton-poet is now telling his entire narrative, namely Gethsemani. Gethsemani is metaphorically both the mountain of Purgatono as well as it's summit, Earthly Paradise, and in a way it is Blake's vision in Merton of Jerusalem.

The truth of Merton's claim in this period to be a "citizen of hell" is apparent in his hilarious paragraph describing his first visit with Robert Lax to St. Bonaventure College. Merton says he was scared of the place, "too many crosses. Too many holy statues. Too much quiet and cheerfulness. Too much pious optimism. It made me very uncomfortable. I had to flee" (p.201). He also informs us that he was "impatient to get back to New York on account of being, as usual, in love" (p.200). Nonetheless, it is at this time that he began to pray regularly, in the room he rents near Columbia after finally leaving his grandparent's house in Douglaston. Merton writes, "It was from there that I was eventually to be driven out by an almost physical push, to go and look for a priest" to be baptized (p.201). But this step only

led him further into the pit of his own hell - his equivocation over the degree of commitment of his life to God. Then, as with Dante-pilgrim, the darkest moment of crisis leads directly to the image of light, grace and hope. He is moved to attend an evening mass and finds the church proper locked, so he approaches a lower, hidden door and enters. There he prays aloud, "If it is Your will, make me a priest" (p.255). He has begun to exercise the willful capitulation which his guides and mentors, Lax and Van Doren had long before described: To be a saint all you have to do is want it. Merton concludes Part II of his autobiography with the desire to become a priest, a desire which made his need for penance unshakeable.

### Merton's Glimpse of Paradise: Part III of *SSM*

The grace and light of Heavenly Paradise illuminates Merton's trip to Cuba in 1940. He had just re-read Dante's *Paradiso* in Italian while recovering in hospital from an appendectomy. He describes one Mass in Cuba this way:

Light blinding and neutralizing, nothing in it of sense or imagination. When I call it light that is a metaphor I am using long after the fact.... It ignored all sense except in order to strike at the heart of the Truth. Sudden and immediate contact had been established between my intellect and the Truth Who was now physically real and substantially before me on the altar... not something speculative and abstract: it was concrete and experiential and belonged to that order of knowledge, yes, but more still to the order of love.... It was love as clean and direct as vision; and it flew straight to the possession of the Truth it loved. My first articulate thought: 'Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!' It lasted only a moment: but it left a breathless joy. (p.284)

Then being true to form and in agreement with Dante, Merton directs us, the readers, to the ordinariness of the light and the concreteness of the experience. He knows the danger of excluding the day by day repetitions of living in favour of the rare peak experience. The hour by hour, minute by minute life of prayer contrasts starkly with the exceedingly brief moments that give a glimpse of the eternity of God outside of time. Merton's faith and self-knowledge provided the basis for this significant taste of freedom from fear that God's love brings to those who will accept it, especially as it meant for Merton relinquishing an understanding of what was going on. He writes, "I had to be led by a way that I could not understand. I had to follow a path that was beyond my choosing" (p.291).

Mary, the Mediatrix of All Grace, leads Merton along this unknown path. But is *Mary* Merton's Beatrice? He writes, "people do not realize the tremendous power of the Blessed Virgin . . . that it is through her hands all graces come because God has willed that she participates in His work for the salvation for men [and women]" (p.229). His Easter pilgrimage to Cuba indicates also his devotion to "the little cheerful, black Virgin who is the queen of Cuba" and it is to her he prays that, if she will "ask Christ to make me His priest, I will give you my heart" (p.282). At

his Easter retreat at Gethsemani the following year, Merton writes, "And I felt the deep, deep silence of the night, and of peace, and of holiness enfold me like love, like safety . . . I realized truly whose house that was, O glorious Mother of God! . . . It is very true that the Cistercian Order is your special territory" (p.322).

It is evident that Mary is of great importance to Merton's journey from fear to freedom in God's love. While Catherine De Heuck was no Beatrice to Merton, she certainly was a Cato-like catalyst in directing him to the priesthood. He was also especially fond of St. Therese of Lisieux, The Little Flower. Much like Dante's St. Lucia, it is to the care of The Little Flower that Merton commits John Paul. He writes, "The first thing that Therese of Lisieux could do for me was to take charge of my brother" (pp.354-55). And it was her autobiography that John Paul chose to read from the stack of books Merton gave him for his preparation for baptism in 1942.

### The Monastery as Merton's Purgatory & Earthly Paradise: Part III & Epilogue of *SSM*

Landscape is vital to both Merton and Dante. They seem to share a cosmic vision that is far reaching in scope, and they never fail to give that vision locality, especially in minute and familiar details of the world and of daily living which readers perfectly understand. Following Dante's structure of the *Purgatorio*, Merton makes his own path of sacred development with his selection and descriptions of his confusions, doubts and hesitations. Merton's equivocations end when he decides to leave for Gethsemani. At St. Bonaventure he hears in his imagination the bell of Gethsemani "calling me home" and, after he finds Father Philotheus to discuss his possible entry into Gethsemani, he writes, "It was as if scales fell off my eyes" (p.365). That image of Cato's injunction to Dante's pilgrim at the foot of Mount Purgatory (*Purg.* 2.122) to get on with the journey is followed by another Dantesque scene when Merton describes his journey from Olean to Gethsemani.

Then the Buffalo train came in through the freezing sleety rain, and I got on, and my last tie with the world I had known snapped and broke. It was nothing less than a civil, moral death. This journey, this transition from the world to a new life, was like flying through some strange new element - as if I were in the stratosphere. And yet I was on the familiar earth and the cold winter rain streaked the windows of the train as we travelled through the dark hills. (p.369)

In Part III, the chapter titled "Sleeping Volcano" ends at the gate of Gethsemani with Merton willing to risk rejection by the Abbot, and entry instead into the army. While his struggles and doubts follow him into the monastery, he never seriously comes close to leaving. He had discovered the freedom that allowed for his success: "I was free . . . I belonged to God not to myself" (p.370). This new sense of self had clearly resolved his fear of the loss of identity.

The final chapter of the book describes his purgation beginning with the liturgy of Advent where "the cold stones of the Abbey ring with a chant that glows with living flame, with clean, profound desire" (p. 380). This Dantesque description shows the brilliance of the light of illuminating grace and its effect upon Merton-pilgrim's sensibilities which are grounded in the physical location of the here and now: he is also enduring the worst cold of his life. He writes of the incarnation of Christ in his soul where "you rest in Him, and He heals you with His secret wisdom," and he notes that in the vespers of St. Lucy, an advent hymn caused the words of St. Ambrose to "flower before God in beauty and in fire" (p.379-80). Nonetheless, war and sorrow, along with all his bad habits, have followed him into the Abbey. For him, Hell is only a thought away.

The refining fires of Purgatory are revealed in his vivid description of the hard labor of Purgatory in the dust-filled hay barn in June. "In about two minutes the place begins to put on a very good imitation of purgatory, for the sun is beating down mercilessly on a tin roof over your head, and the loft is one big black stifling oven" (p.391). He wishes he had thought about the barn when he was "committing so many sins, in the world." He continues, "When the Kentucky sun has worked up his full anger . . . with his raging heat . . . [then] begins the season of the Cistercian's true penance" (p.391). The monk soaked in sweat hears the din of "a thousand crickets . . . [in] the cloister court [that] makes the monastery sound like a gigantic frying pan standing over a fire" (p. 391). Flies also bother the monks. But Merton says in the same breath that it is still "a wonderful season, fuller of consolations than it is of trials". However, he does point out that "it is the season when novices give up and go back to the world . . . summer is their hardest test." But Merton declares, "I had no desire to leave . . . because my work and all my sweat . . . made me feel as if I were doing something for God" (p.392). Merton contrasts the time of day with the stages of purgation in his own way. The noonday sun is merciless but the summer evenings have "a clean smell of pine . . . on the breeze" and the crickets' din changes to "a constant universal treble going up to God out of the fields, rising like incense" (p.393).

In the latter section of Part III Merton significantly makes reparation for a deep and painful wound caused by his sense of failure as a brother to John Paul. As the last surviving member of Merton's immediate family, John Paul perhaps represents both the loss and the failure of love of each parent. Merton poignantly depicts John Paul's last visit to Gethsemani in the fullness of the growing season, the visit that culminates in his baptism with Merton acting as Virgil, brother, and father in the necessary instruction of the Church. Merton's love for John Paul makes the reparation for his previous mistakes possible: the past failure of love is overcome by love. However, Merton's continued sense of responsibility, though, is apparent in the poem "For My Brother", written after John Paul's death, April 1943, and which concludes the main body of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The poem, too, articulates the journey and purpose of Merton-poet's goal in writing the autobiography. The sad

litany ends with the promise of resurrection and the hopeful note of the bells that call John Paul home.

That home finds its counterpart, however poignantly distant, in the Earthly Paradise represented in Merton's Epilogue. His inclusive address of first 'you' then 'we' and then, most truthfully, 'I' helps reveal how Dante's place of expiation had so thoroughly infused Merton's spiritual experience, almost incorporating the rebukes of Beatrice and the baptizing of Matilda. Merton's injunctions here are among his strongest as he identifies himself:

There is only one vocation. . . . no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer . . .

In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going.

In another sense we have already arrived.

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light. . . . But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived! (p.419)

Merton may have entered an Earthly Paradise, yet he knows he has not yet taken of the waters of the Lethe to wash away the memory of sin. The Epilogue not only encapsulates Merton-pilgrim's journey, but it brings the echo of the resounding prophecy of continuing purgation in the final words. These are fittingly spoken to Merton-pilgrim by Merton-poet's own creation of God: "That you shall become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men" (*SSM*, p.423). Later, writing in *The Sign of Jonas*, Merton describes those burnt men as "the burnt faces of the Prophets and the Evangelists, transformed by the white-hot dangerous presence of inspiration, for they looked at God as into a furnace and the Seraphim flew down and purified their lips with fire. . . . They are . . . humbled by the revelation they wrote down. They are my Fathers. They are the 'burnt men' in the last line of *The Seven Storey Mountain*" (*SJ*, p.224).

## Notes and References

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations are from Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, abbreviated to *SSM*.

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