

A LETTER FROM THOMAS MERTON

Thomas Merton writes about D.H. Lawrence, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh in a letter that appears here for the first time in print. This letter is published with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Thomas Merton Legacy Trust and the assistance of Roger Hubank.

Preface by Paul Pearson

The five volumes of Thomas Merton's correspondence published under the general editorship of William Shannon contain over 2,200 letters written by Thomas Merton to a wide variety of correspondents. Further volumes of letters have been published containing both sides of the correspondence between Merton and figures such as James Laughlin, Rosemary Ruether and Czeslaw Milosz. The volume of Merton's correspondence with Laughlin, his friend, publisher and trustee, contains 176 letters from Merton out of a possible 403, figures which give some idea of the extent of Merton's correspondence.

For the last decade of his life Merton kept carbon copies of most of the letters he wrote and these are now on file at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Bellarmine College in Louisville. In the years prior to this, publication of the letters Merton wrote has depended on his correspondents making the letters he wrote to them known and available for publication. Over the years many unpublished letters have come to light from a great variety of sources. In this edition of the *Merton Journal* we have the privilege to publish one such letter made available by a member of the Thomas Merton Society, Roger Hubank, who has written a short introduction placing the letter within the context of his brief correspondence with Merton.

This is a fascinating letter from a number of perspectives. Firstly, as Roger notes, the generosity of Merton's reply in response to a letter from a casual correspondent, especially when Merton's time for writing was so limited by the monastic schedule, his other writing

commitments and his work as Master of Novices. Secondly, it is interesting to see Merton's comments at this period of his life on D.H. Lawrence. Merton had first read Lawrence during the thirties when he was in Europe. In this letter he expresses his interest in rereading some of Lawrence's work because of his interest in Mexico and Latin America. In Merton's final years there are further references to Lawrence. In 1967 he refers to him in an essay on Faulkner as one of this centuries "sapiential" writers along with such figures as Eliot, Pasternak, Yeats, Suzuki and Maritain.¹ Then in November 1968, on the last stages of his Asian journey, Merton buys Lawrence's *Twilight in Italy* and his *Selected Poems* "curious to read again after so many years his 'Virgin Youth' when today I have seen the Shiva lingam at Mahabalipuram."²

Thirdly, this letter contains a number of references to other literary figures Merton had read or was reading and it is interesting to see in particular his references to Greene, Hemingway, Dostoevsky and to Goldbrunner's book on Jung. Finally, Merton's reference to being "warmed by the memory of Bullough's rooms, and of Cambridge" are some of the most positive remarks Merton has made up to this point in his life about the difficult time he had at Cambridge, the lowest point in his spiritual journey.

1. Thomas Merton. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*. ed Patrick Hart. (New York: New Directions. 1981) p.99.
2. Thomas Merton. *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*. ed Patrick Hart. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) p.301.

Introduction by Roger Hubank

My letter to Merton was written in the summer of 1958, after re-reading *Elected Silence*, and not long after I'd come down from Cambridge. The problem that it raised - the 'very real problem' Merton refers to - had to do with the status, for a Catholic, of the work of a

great writer, of its relation to the moral and pastoral authority of the Church. At that time the *Index* was still in place. Only five years before, Graham Greene had been summoned to Westminster Cathedral to have read to him (by Cardinal Griffin) a letter from the Holy Office requiring cuts to be made to the text of *The Power and the Glory*.

The impetus to write to Merton arose out of a number of disparaging remarks in *Elected Silence* which I took to be based on commonly held, though wholly mistaken, assumptions about D.H. Lawrence, who seemed to me then, (indeed, still does) a deeply serious writer, concerned in a fundamental way for human well-being. Cambridge in those days - at least, the circles I mixed in - was an intimidating place dominated by an aggressive empiricism, the proponents of which sought to deny any kind of meaning to the things which mattered most to me. It was F.R. Leavis, and then Lawrence ('speaking out for life and growth') who provided the counter-attack. By the time I went down, literature, as a focus of profound moral consciousness, had become extremely important to me. So I was troubled to find Merton, the fellow-Catholic I had most admired since reading him in the sixth form, subscribing to the familiar calumnies, first, in *Elected Silence*, then later in *The Sign of Jonas* (see the entry for June 13th 1947, on which occasion Jay Laughlin also seems to have spoken up for Lawrence).

Much to my regret I didn't continue the correspondence. I very much wish I had, especially as I would want to argue now what, later, was to become clear - that Merton had far more in common with Lawrence, the great imaginative novelist, than he supposed at the time. But I was over-awed by the generosity of his response. And my knowledge of Gethsemani was confined to a reading of *Elected Silence*, and *The Sign of Jonas*, from which I'd gathered that his opportunities for letter writing were so strictly limited it seemed unfair to seek to take up more of his time.

OUR LADY OF GETHSEMANI
TRAPPIST, KENTUCKY

Aug. 18, 1958

My Dear Mr Hubank

Your very good letter has reached me, and touched me. I want to thank you for it and, even though I cannot give you a satisfactory answer, I shall at least try to give honest consideration to the very real problem which it raises. Do not fear that I intend to refer you to your pastor. It happens that this is one of the periods of the year when we are allowed to write a couple of letters without further ado about it, so I am writing to you, warmed by the memory of Bullough's rooms, and of Cambridge.

This cannot be a satisfactory answer to your question, because it is ten years since I wrote the book in which Lawrence is referred to, and twenty or more since I have read the *Plumed Serpent* which I have been intending to reread because of a current interest of mine in Mexico and Latin America. When I have done so I may have something more intelligent to say. Meanwhile all I can do is clarify the position I took ten years ago and make some important changes in it.

As you sense so rightly, I cannot reject *en bloc* Lawrence's sensibility. I cannot but sympathize deeply with his passionate and sincere attempt to return to the springs of genuine human experience, to reach at life in its reality and its existential mystery (pardon the jargon) instead of living screened off from life by a bourgeois and materialistic facade. (I can see that this letter is going to be full of jargon, so let one apology cover it all). In this I have always agreed with him and I continue to agree with him.

Ten years ago I think I was bending over backwards as a convert, to reject as far as possible everything that Catholics might frown upon, rightly or wrongly. In other words, in accepting the faith I had accepted perhaps more wrongly than I realized, social prejudices that have nothing to do with the faith. Still, I think this convert docility was understandable and can be pardoned if, later, one strives to amend any errors or failures in sincerity. There is a lot of wholesale condemnation in the *Seven Storey Mountain* which proceeds from this kind of concern to be an acceptable member of the new group and to avoid all possible reprehension.

At that time also my ideas about morals and asceticism were grossly over-simplified, to the point of being at times a little Manichean - again, through a concern to be super-orthodox and "right". This had a lot to do of course with the rather frantic repudiation of Lawrence, as well as of Cambridge (because I had made a botch of my freshman year). In point of fact, as you yourself point out, I had been hit hard by Lawrence precisely because of a Dionysian element in my own nature. I read him too young, however, and he bowled me over too much for it to be said that I understood him. Or rather to be more precise, I think I used him as an excuse for undergraduate debauchery which was fake experience and an evasion of experience - and afterwards confusedly blamed him for the falsity that had been my own.

The fact remains to be examined whether Lawrence himself was not to a great extent deluded and whether he did not fall victim to the satanic possibilities in his own cult of life. The great danger of paganism remains the fact that the goodness of passion and of enjoyment and of the earth and all that is in it can be exploited by the spiritual powers that aim at our deception and enslavement. I don't pretend to understand precisely what that means, but any Catholic knows the reality of the danger. As a monk, I have to think of the great difference there is between a "mysticism" that consists in abandoning oneself to the dark orgiastic forces of life and of nature,

and the love of God which enables us to possess His Spirit by being possessed by Him - *habere est haberi*. It is absolutely essential to be free in order to truly lose and find oneself in God, and I too often have the feeling that Lawrence was not free but was the slave of forces lower than himself. In this I may be very unjust.

I notice too often in "contemplatives" that their freedom is illusory and that the illusion is based on an equally illusory asceticism of repression - leading in the end to a narcissistic swimming in one's own sweet darkness. And I think I can say that Lawrence's way is probably much more honest and healthy than this. In any case, I am absolutely convinced that one of the most important things in Christian and religious life today is to put the passions and the emotions and the "dark" inner self of man back where it belongs. The unconscious has a most important part to play in our lives, and we have been terribly warped by our so called civilization. The constant perversion and caricaturing of real experience by bourgeois culture, and by bourgeois pseudo-spiritual life, is shameful and sinful and is rapidly leading us all to disaster. In this Lawrence and I would heartily agree and I am ashamed of myself for not being able to see it and say it more clearly ten years ago.

I do not think I agree with your estimate of Waugh and Greene. They write good enough novels, although I have glanced at Waugh's latest (*Gilbert Pinfold*) and admit it looks awful. I have no desire to read it. It seems to me that the problems raised by Greene in some of his novels are certainly interesting and even important from a religious point of view, though they may be to a great extent artificial "cases" trumped up for the sake of argument. I would not however call him discreditable to the Church. I wonder in what sense you mean that. I would rather say that the novel about the priest in Mexico makes a very true statement about the Church in our time, the awful poverty of man and the immense mercy of God. As for Joyce, I have always thought of him as a person with an essentially Catholic mind and one who got himself into the kind of predicament Greene would write

about! Forster I admire very much. Dos Passos I used to like but doubt if I would still like him. One of the best things I have read recently seems to me to be Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*. I do not read many novels, but at the moment I get a tremendous amount out of Dostoevsky.

To bring this long letter to a close: have you read a little book by a Fr. Goldbrunner, a student of Jung, called *Holiness and Wholeness*? I think it treats quite well the question of the unconscious and its part in the spiritual life.

With all good wishes. God bless you

Sincerely yours in Christ

Fr. m. Louis
(Thomas Merton)

P.S. I shall send you under separate cover a privately printed thing of mine on Prometheus which may or may not contribute something to this discussion.