

Merton's Earlier *Commedia*: Dante and *My Argument with the Gestapo*

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In a scene near the middle of Thomas Merton's early novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*,¹ the narrator slips into a London church for early morning Mass. In the midst of the silence a kind of dialogue begins, as the light of the flickering candles on the altar draws his attention, and probes his motives for returning to a London beset by war. To the question, 'You who went away from here lost, would you ever have returned here if you had been lost still?' he

responds, 'I make this journey for the reasons Dante made his' (p.137). The ambiguity of this reply is a matter to which we will have to return later. What is immediately of interest is the fact that the basic pattern of the Dantean spiritual journey, which will be of importance for Merton's 1948 autobiography, as its title *The Seven Storey Mountain*² of course indicates, is already of significance in June 1941 the summer before he entered the

monastery, when he was writing what he then called 'Journal of My Escape from the Nazis',³ finally published under its new title shortly after Merton's death. I hope that examining the importance of Dante for this earlier work will both help to clarify its own rather enigmatic theme, and also suggest something of the role of the *Divine Comedy* for *The Seven Storey Mountain* as well.

It is a fact that Merton was preoccupied with Dante during the spring and early summer of 1941, while he was teaching at St Bonaventure College in upstate New York. In a journal entry for early February, he speaks of returning to the *Divine Comedy* for the first time since his university days in 1933;⁴ he eventually accumulated 114 pages of handwritten notes on the successive cantos, evidently in preparation for a course on Dante which he was planning to teach.⁵ As he was working his way through the *Commedia*, he also began to write a new novel, so that the two projects were proceeding simultaneously. In a 26 June 1941 journal entry, Merton comments, 'In the mornings I sometimes write something in the *Journal of my Escape from the Nazis*. In the afternoon, read Dante.'⁶ It is not surprising, then, that the presence of Dante is evident in the novel. But it is by no means inevitable that Dante should be the principal inspiration for the narrative structure and central theme of Merton's fiction. Yet that is, I believe, demonstrably the case.

What the 'Journal of My Escape' owes to the *Divine Comedy* is first of all the relationship between the author and his persona. It seems particularly odd that the main figure in Merton's novel, the first-person narrator, is a character named Thomas J. Merton, born on the same day, in the same place, as the author Merton (see p.159), having had evidently the same earlier experiences in life as the real Merton, yet now wandering around Europe having rather Kafka-esque adventures at the very same time that the real Merton is back in Olean, New York, writing a novel and studying Dante. Little wonder that publishers were more confused than interested when the book first made the rounds. But what Merton is doing is after all not very different from what Dante did: the narrator in the *Commedia* has the name, traits and biographical background of Dante Alighieri the Florentine. Granted, he also is a representative figure, the perennial figure of the Christian pilgrim, one who literally and symbolically has here no lasting city. But this wider identity is equally applicable to the narrator of 'Journal of My Escape'. As the dialogue in the church continues, the candlelight poses the question, 'Are you an exile, stranger?' and the response is, 'Yes, I am an exile all over the earth' (p.137). Merton's rather unusual biographical background, his cosmopolitan upbringing, which is continually commented on throughout the novel, actually

makes him a particularly effective representative figure for all the rootless, alienated wanderers of the twentieth-century world.

Likewise, in both cases, the author-narrator relates adventures which, on the literal level at least, never happened. On Good Friday 1300, Dante was not lost in a dark wood and about to descend into a subterranean funnel inhabited by damned souls, though this is what the *Divine Comedy* claims he was doing. This example helps to clarify what might initially seem to be the rather bizarre suspension of disbelief required by Merton's 'Journal'. What he is in fact doing is making a rather daring transposition of Dante's narrative strategy into a contemporary mode. Merton's fictional voyage to Europe is just as truly a 'spiritual journey' as Dante's sojourn in the underworld. Each is a kind of pilgrimage, a journey of discovery, above all of self-discovery; and the self which discovers its true identity in each case is not limited to the persona inside the fiction, but encompasses the author as well. It could be maintained that 'novel' is in fact a misleading genre classification for 'Journal of My Escape', which is in fact a kind of imaginative meditation on the state of the world and of the author's own soul, in which the fictional elements are simply the framework for a very factual examination of conscience.

It might well be argued, of course, that the analogy between the two works falters badly, since Dante's

was a journey through the other world, hell, purgatory and heaven, whereas Merton's is through the all too mundane landscape of war-torn England and France. Imagination is a necessity for Dante, a hindrance for Merton. But actually Merton's landscape is just as 'visionary' as that of Dante. His concern is not with events but with meaning, with the spiritual dimension of the war, which lies beneath the surface of ordinary life just as surely as the abyss of Dante's inferno opens under the unsuspecting feet of those who arrogantly tread the solid earth. This distinction between the facade and the underlying reality is presented early in the novel when the narrator depicts London in terms of the two cities of St. Augustine.⁷ After describing the first city, the 'city of angels' (p.33) with its well-mannered children, its parks and galleries, he continues: 'Until, suddenly, sometime, not for everybody, and never for the innocent, the masks fall off the houses, and the streets become liars and the squares become thieves and the buildings become murderers' (p.34). This is the London against which Blake railed,⁸ with its great dark areas of slums; it is the 'unreal city' of Eliot's *The Waste Land*,⁹ itself a reference to Dante's hell. The narrator concludes: 'But the second city, which was suddenly revealed at a definite time in my life, and, perhaps, everybody else's, was as terrible as no music at all, as dark as chaos, as inescapable as

Fear' (p.35). It is, quite clearly, a vision of hell itself, as was indicated on the very opening pages of the novel, when the narrator is forced to go 'downward into the earth,' into the Underground station which serves as a bomb shelter for the poor. Clutching a ticket 'marked one penny,' he suddenly has a vision of 'people sitting along the platforms, down below, like souls waiting for the boatman Charon, by the black river of hell' (p.18). Even after he once again emerges from the tunnel, he continues to encounter infernal shapes, 'thin voices of people roaming quietly on the stairs like wraiths in *The Aeneid*, gathering around a saucer of blood' (p.27), 'wrecks of women and men' who 'come and go in and out, wooden and white and dead' (p.30). The implications of these images, and the many similar ones of death and disintegration, are quite evident: the hellish conditions which England is enduring are not simply the result of external forces, not merely the consequences of the Blitz, but the consequence as well of inner rot, of a culture based on deception and superficiality and pervasive bad faith, a society which had lost its values without realizing it, which mouthed its platitudes without believing them – and without realizing it no longer believed. Merton is clearly indicting not Germany alone but Western civilization as a whole for the war.

This does not mean that other nations are treated less harshly than England. The narrator's journey to

occupied France (after being expelled from England as a putative spy), could be compared to the passage from upper hell to the City of Dis, nether hell, in the *Inferno*.¹⁰ As the demons make their appearance only beyond the gates of Dis in Dante, so the narrator encounters Nazism first-hand in Paris, which is described as 'the artificial city ... like something I have dreamed up, in bed, in the early hours of the morning when dreams are most vivid' (p.181). The French detectives who harass the author are 'big, thick-necked brutal men, Frenchmen that look and behave exactly like Germans' (p.184). To some extent then, the conquered are indistinguishable from, or have taken on the characteristics of, their conquerors. Thus Merton refuses to divide the world into good and bad, heroes and villains. Even the Americans are included in the criticism, by way of the description of the contents of a time capsule, which becomes the symbol and substance of the ultimate bankruptcy of modern Western materialism: it 'will only carry on, for thousands of years, the dreadful, futile, and trivial worries of the dead: that same concern over the lost mate in a pair of shoes, over a dyed dress, a torn stocking, a broken piece of furniture, over Henry's medicine' (p.126).

But the pilgrim Merton is not simply an objective observer, self-righteously flaying the crimes of others. In his comments on the two cities, he had said that the innocent

alone are spared the sight of the decay beneath the placid surface: he who has seen this rot sees a reflection of his own evil. As noted earlier, the speaker's reply to the question, 'You who went away from here lost, would you ever have returned here if you had been lost still?' was ambiguous. He says, 'I make this journey for the reasons Dante made his' (p.137). But Dante begins his journey through the other world precisely because he is lost, which suggests that this journey too is an attempt to find the right way, to find the true self. It is a journey not only into the maelstrom of Europe at war but back into his own past, the years of growing up in England and in France, in an effort to identify and acknowledge his own responsibility for the conditions which made the war possible. As Dante descends into the abyss of hell so as to recognize and reject sin, especially his own sins, so Merton returns to Europe to confront and repent his own sinfulness, his own acceptance of the ethical nihilism that he believes has made the war possible and in some sense inevitable. He recalls events from his own European past (evidently authentic, aside from the use of pseudonymous names) that expose his failure to assume responsibility for his own moral lapses, which culminated in his ignominious departure from England years before:

When it came time for them to take away my scholarship

at Cambridge, and when it came time for me to go away from England for good, I wanted to say I was wrong, but didn't know how, because the word wrong didn't exist, no, not in the novels ... I wanted to say I was sorry, but the word sorry is the one you use when you step on someone's foot, in the bus ... I wanted to say I had sinned, but there was no such thing as sin: sin was a morbid concept, and if you had it in your mind, this concept, it would poison you entirely and you would go crazy. (p.148-9)

Thus his return to war-torn Europe, even if only in imagination, is for Merton a way of seeing, and saying, what his younger self was unable to recognize and to articulate—to acknowledge and confess his own sinfulness and his implication in the culpable blindness of an entire culture.

This central theme is articulated throughout the book, most successfully in two crucial scenes. The first is Merton's meeting with an old girlfriend. Any reworking of Dante worth its salt needs a Beatrice. This journal, as we shall see, actually has two. He has already recalled two meetings in the past with this girl, appropriately known only as B, in terms perhaps intended to recall Dante's encounters as a young man with Beatrice in *La Vita Nuova*.¹¹ Here he meets her in Kensington

Gardens, and she is dressed not in her air-raid warden's uniform but in civilian clothes, and so 'is something like herself' (p.113). Their conversation turns to questions of the loss and recovery of identity, the conformity and regimentation both symbolized and required by putting on a uniform. B admits that while in uniform she shared the general suspicion of her old friend's motives and actions: 'It was not until I dressed as myself, and remembered who I was, that I remembered who you are also: I had forgotten that you were my friend, or that I had friends, any more. But when I am in uniform I do not know friendships, only kinds of fierce, mechanical associations, and animal strife' (p.115). She is repelled by the casual, cynical attitudes of soldiers who pick her up, the 'persistent and studied love-making that the world seemed to believe in' (p.116), which she identifies with the war. In the London of the Blitz, with its combination of material destruction and psychological confusion, B recognizes 'the objectification of death, and hell' (p.117). But Merton replies that such attitudes are not only the effect but in some sense the cause of the war. He continues: 'I am in no way superior to them because they fight the war and I try to understand the war. Their pride is no greater than mine, and they are no further than I am from the Kingdom of God. Suppose you believe, as I do, that the war is, in some way we cannot understand, a retribution for the

acts of men; my life has probably been much worse than most of theirs' (p.118). He recalls that even with B herself, in the past, his interests had been base and selfish: 'Therefore, when you compare me with them, now, I cannot speak for shame, because I remember the way it was when I myself made love to you' (p.119). This scene is in many ways reminiscent of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice in the Garden of Eden atop Mt Purgatory, where Dante is forced to acknowledge his own evasions, infidelities and mixed motives, and in confessing them truly becomes himself, assumes his true identity. Here, in this garden, with this still quite earthbound B, there is a sort of mutual confession and absolution. Though this is the last time they see each other, they have been able to be themselves in one another's presence, to recognize themselves both as sinful and as redeemed.

This same theme concludes the scene in the church from which we have already quoted, as the suffering of the war is identified with the passion of Christ: 'You lived in a world where pride had long been burning underground like a fire smouldering for a hundred years in a caved-in coal mine. You lived in a world where, for despair, the young men hanged themselves in the showers of colleges. Your pride was not the world's fault, but yours, because you were the one who finally consented to be, also, proud. Look now where the Crucifixion flowered

in London like a tree, and the wounds were made in Cambridge, red as oleanders' (p.138). Just as it is a total misreading of Dante to think his main interest in the *Inferno* is to display his enemies getting their just deserts, so Merton's journey in spirit to a world at war is not to apportion blame to others but to see that his own inner war has been both mirror and even cause of the present cataclysm. But the final words he hears, 'Remember this, at the ringing of the three bells' (p.138), remind him of the prayer before communion, '*Domine, non sum dignus*', which speaks not only of unworthiness but of healing and of union with Jesus crucified and risen.

For Merton as for Dante (though not, perhaps, for many readers of Dante), the journey does not end with hell. Though the upward path is less evident than the downward in 'Journal of My Escape', it is nonetheless there, waiting to be found. It may be associated in particular with the mysterious Madame Gongora, in whose house Merton stays while in London. She is at least a Beatrice figure, and perhaps more than that. (A letter to her actually concludes with the Latin '*Salve Regina*' [p.190].) In this letter from Paris, Merton describes her as his muse, his source of illumination. He writes, 'I invite your inspirations, madama, living in your otherworldly house, not out of the bombed out city, not in the eighteenth century, not in the sentimen-

tal minds of the moralizing communists, but in and out of the world, knowing the illusion from the truth. Teach me, teach me. Don't be afraid to write me a card, now and then!' (p.188). She, and soon Merton himself (p.102, p.154), say they are citizens of Casa, that is, of that otherworldly house which is nevertheless not out of the bombed city but within it – Casa, which suggests to the attentive reader the opening stanza of St. John of the Cross' poem 'The Dark Night', in which the speaker, inflamed by love, leaves unobserved from his quiet house ('estando ya mi casa sosegada'¹²). (The less observant reader has to wait for the wild parody of this verse in a later chapter, as the narrator dreams that he is escaping from his hotel: 'On a dark, in the middle of the afternoon, night, escapo-o de mi hotel, estando ya mi casa sosegada' [p.199].) This poem serves as the text commented on by John in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel*,¹³ the symbolic equivalent of Dante's ascent of Mount Purgatory. Madame Gongora is the inspiration not only for his writing, then, but for his ascent to God. In fact the two are identified when Merton writes in his letter to her the macaronic verse: 'Toute lettera se fait un Jacob's Ladder, / Hasta el ciel, desde la lousy terre: / Laquelle habemos, con nos vils orgueils / Hecho la casa di folor y guerre!' (p.189) ('Every letter becomes a Jacob's Ladder, up to the heavens from the lousy earth, which we with our base pride have made

the house of folly and of war.') He intends his writing to be an instrument of ascent to God, presumably not only for himself but for the reader as well. There is at least an implicit invitation to participate in the process of radical purification and regeneration which the speaker is undergoing. It is not clear at what stage of the spiritual journey the book concludes. The pattern is definitely left open-ended, as indeed Merton's own life certainly was at the time he wrote the book. While there are intimations of further spiritual development, the emphasis has been on purification and renunciation. Yet in the very last words of the book, the speaker says, 'I think suddenly 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). Here, at least in desire, is envisioned the ultimate goal of writing as of life, total self-surrender for the glory of God. If the equivalent to Dante's *Inferno* has been described in detail, and his *Purgatorio* sketched in, in this concluding invocation of the angels is not the *Paradiso* also descried, at least from afar?

In the Introduction which Merton wrote in January 1968 for *My Argument with the Gestapo*, he says, '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. That definition was necessarily personal. I do not claim to have gained full access to the whole myth of Europe and the West, only to my own myth. But as a child of two wars, my myth had to include that of Europe and of its falling apart: not to mention America with its own built-in absurdities' (p.6). I would suggest, on the basis of reading this work in relation to Dante, that this myth, at once personal and communal, can be described as a modern divine comedy, a journey toward God which cannot bypass the hell that each and all have created to frustrate that journey.

I would further suggest that this myth provides the basic structure of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as well. In some ways the surrealistic landscape of this journal is more congenial to the Dantesque pattern than the strict autobiography will be. We can readily accept the England of Merton's memory and imagination, with its frequent reminders of Eliot, Joyce, Kafka and Evelyn Waugh, as the equivalent of Dante's hell, while it is less easy to see that the more sober, factual France and England of the autobiography is a spiritual landscape, a symbol, as well. Something wonderful is lost. At the same time, coming to *The Seven Storey Mountain* from *My Argument with the Gestapo* heightens our awareness that Merton has borrowed much more than his title from Dante, that here too the theme of the spiritual journey structures the narrative, and that here the journey

has progressed beyond the point at which the fictional journal had come to an end. When he wrote 'Journal of My Escape' in the summer of 1941 he had already made his Holy Week retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani but had not yet determined to try to become a Cistercian. He speaks in the novel of 'getting up almost as early as the Trappist monks' (p.130) when he is in London, and in his letter to Madame Gongora from Paris he writes:

I am so unpublished, I am a kind of a Trappist, in my own way. I am so kept apart from the thirsting imaginations of the public not unintelligent but greedy for such books as I think I want to write (all about God in a new witty and pertinent way, face first through the muck of the reeky civilization we got ourselves stuck with, and out of the other side with double-talk in my hair like a swimmer free of the weeds!) that I am a kind of Trappist. (p.188)

Without fully realizing it, the Thomas Merton of *My Argument with the Gestapo* is here pointing forward to the Thomas Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, who will be not just 'a kind of Trappist' in his solitary obscurity but a Trappist in actual fact, who paradoxically will be far from unpublished and anything but obscure, who will indeed write 'about God in a new witty and perti-

nent way' (though without the double-talk) in the autobiography and the dozens of books that would follow. Thus the fictional journal is in a very real sense a 'prequel' pointing forward to the next phase of Merton's life to be both lived and written, to the further stages of that pilgrimage toward God still to be made 'for the reasons Dante made his.'

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948); the allusion is of course to the seven levels of Mount Purgatory, corresponding to the seven deadly sins; the ascent of the mountain is the process of being healed of the scars of these sins, and the culmination of this stage of the journey is the return to paradise, to the Garden of Eden, located at the mountain's summit.
3. See Naomi Burton's introduction, 'A Note on the Author and This Book' (*My Argument with the Gestapo*, p.9).
4. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p.303-4; for his initial encounter with Dante at Cambridge, see *Seven Storey Mountain*, p.122-3.
5. 'Manuscript notes on *The Divine Comedy* of Dante', leaves 227-340 of

the 'Fitzgerald File' of Merton materials in the archives of the Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY.

6. *Run to the Mountain*, p.377.

7. 'Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self' (St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dodds et al. [New York: Modern Library, 1950], p.477 [Bk. XIV, c. 28]). In his Introduction to this edition, Merton writes, 'The difference between the two cities is the difference between two loves. Those who are united in the City of God are united by the love of God and of one another in God. Those who belong to the other city are indeed not united in any real sense: but it can be said that they have one thing in common besides their opposition to God: each one of them is intent on the love of himself above all else ... The love which unites the citizens of the heavenly city is disinterested love, or charity. The other city is built on selfish love, or cupidity ... Those who love God love a supreme and infinite good that cannot be diminished by being shared. Those who place their hopes on the possession of created and limited goods are doomed to conflict with one another and to everlasting fear of losing whatever they may have gained ... The city that is united merely by an alliance of temporal interests cannot promise itself more than a temporary cessation from

hostilities and its order will never be anything but a makeshift' (p.xiii). 8. In the opening chapter the narrator, in a conversation with a man during an air raid, asks, 'Will you rebuild the bricks of Bermondsey in England's green and pleasant land, and cry through London's chartered streets the victories of Tottenham Hotspur, the defeats of Brentford?' (p.22), an ironic reference to Blake's 'Jerusalem': 'I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand: / Till we have built Jerusalem, / In Englands green & pleasant Land' (ll. 13-16) (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. [New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1988], p.95-6), combined with a caustic quotation from his 'London': 'I wander thro' each charter'd street, / Near where the charter'd Thames does flow. / And mark in every face I meet / Marks of weakness, marks of woe' (ll. 1-4) (*Complete Poetry and Prose*, p.26). The latter poem is again quoted near the conclusion of chapter 4 as the narrator walks the streets at night and hears 'the walls of houses echoing, from street to street, the harlot's curse' (p.35): 'But most thro' midnight streets I hear / How the youthful Harlots curse / Blasts the new-born Infants tear / And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse' (ll. 13-16) (*Complete Poetry and Prose*, p.27). 9. *The Waste Land*, l. 62 (T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* [New York: Harcourt,

Brace & World, 1952], p.39); the reference is to *Inferno*, III. 55–7, as Eliot's note points out (p.51).

10. See Dante, *Inferno*, canto 9 (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy – I: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers [Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1949], p.123–7).

11. Dante Alighieri, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Classics, 1969).

12. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p.711.

13. *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, p.68–9.

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