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THOMAS MERTON, ARCHIVIST

When I mentioned the title for this paper to my wife she said, “but you’re the archivist, not Merton.” Well, maybe now, but for much of his life Merton was his own archivist, maybe an anti-archivist at times as Michael Mott calls him,¹ but with a full awareness and understanding of who he was as a writer, long before his first books were ever published. In this paper I want to illustrate this from a number of angles to give a broad picture of the Merton industry, an industry founded and supported by Merton himself.

The son of artists – Owen, a New Zealand watercolorist, and Ruth, an interior designer who had a number of articles published during her short life – Merton throughout his life was a literary artist, more specifically an autobiographer. Before he was old enough to write himself, Ruth kept a journal of his first two years – “Tom’s Book” – recording his development, his daily schedule and listing his growing vocabulary among other entries.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton, already an avid reader, recalls how he and his friends at the Lycee Ingres, in Montauban in 1926, when he

¹ M. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994, p. 393. (From now on abbreviated to Mott.)

was only eleven, "were all furiously writing novels" and that he was "engaged in a great adventure story." Although that particular story "was never finished" he recalls that he "finished at least one other, and probably two, besides one which I wrote at St. Antonin before coming to the Lycee." These novels "scribbled in exercise books, profusely illustrated in pen and ink"² may sound like the poetic license of the budding author writing in later years but, recently discovered manuscripts dating back to December 1929 confirm his description. One manuscript, *The Haunted Castle*,³ obviously imitating the recently published Winnie the Pooh stories is "profusely illustrated in pen and ink" and another, *Ravenswell*, is an adventure story filling an exercise book of one hundred and fifty-eight pages, and was written in just twelve days.⁴ Another story in this collection, *The Black Sheep*, is about life at Oakham, the public school in England that Merton attended from 1929 to 1933, and has a distinctly autobiographical flavor to it making it difficult to believe that the boy Merton is describing in the story is none other than himself, certainly the story contains detailed descriptions of Oakham and life at the school based on Merton's own experience. The discovery of these manuscripts verify Merton's own description of his early attempts at writing in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and, the autobiographical nature of *The Black Sheep*, takes Merton's use of autobiography as his major and preferred method of writing back earlier than would have previously been acknowledged, right back to his early teenage years.⁵

²Th. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, London: Sheldon Press, 1975, p. 52. (Abbreviated to *SSM*.)

³Th. Merton, *The Haunted Castle*, in: *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (Winter 1994): 7-10, is the earliest of these manuscripts and dates back to Christmas 1929.

⁴These manuscripts were discovered in December 1993 by the present writer and Robert E. Daggy in the possession of Frank Merton Trier, a first cousin, with whom Merton spent some school holidays until the summer of 1930.

The style of the author's handwriting, the content of the stories, and Mr. Trier's testimony, verified their authenticity. The manuscripts remain in Mr. Trier's possession with photocopies held on file at the Merton Center.

⁵In a 1939 entry in his personal journal Merton records a memory of keeping a diary during the Christmas holidays in 1929 and also of re-reading a diary from 1931 which he had kept. See Th. Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. by Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper, 1995, pp. 86 and 103. (Abbreviated to *RM*.)

The most extraordinary thing about these stories is that they have been preserved at all. Admittedly, not by Merton himself, but by his closest living relatives with whom he was staying at this time. I can imagine a parent keeping a child's school books, but a more distant relative would be less likely to do so, especially through that intervening period after Owen's death when Thomas Merton completely disappeared from their lives – avoiding, as instructed by his maternal grandparents, Owen's relatives in England and staying with his godfather Tom Bennett up until his decisive move to the United States in 1933. It was then at least a further fifteen years, including the second world war, before they may possibly have heard news of him with the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁶ My conjecture is they may have sensed something of Merton's gift for writing and held on to them. Whatever the reason, they have been preserved and form the earliest surviving part of the Merton corpus written by his own hand.

The next period I want to turn to are the years 1939 to 1941, the period immediately prior to Merton's entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani. The summer of 1939 and part of the summer of 1940 Merton spent at Olean with his friends Bob Lax and Ed Rice. The three friends spent their time writing novels and Merton tells us his novel "grew longer and longer and longer and eventually it was about five hundred pages long, and was called first *Straits of Dover* then *The Night Before the Battle*, and finally *The Labyrinth*."⁷ The following year Merton wrote *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* and in 1941, whilst at St. Bonaventures, *My Argument with the Gestapo*. He attempted to get *The Labyrinth*, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* and *My Argument* published at the time but without success.

Before his departure from St. Bonaventures to the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 9th 1941, Merton gave to Fr. Irenaeus Herscher, O.F.M., his friend and the librarian at St. Bonaventures, a variety of materials including teaching notes, poems, journals and other materials, which formed the nucleus of the Merton collection still housed at St. Bonaventures' Friedsam Memorial Library. This collection has been developed over the years through acquisitions, further donations from Merton himself and from his literary agent, Naomi Burton Stone.

⁶ *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published in England in 1949 with the title *Elected Silence*.

⁷ *SSM.*, 240.

Merton's memory of this time vary in terms of his recollections of the materials he destroyed and those he saved. In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, before departing for Gethsemani, Merton records

I took manuscripts of three finished novels and one half-finished novel and ripped them up and threw them in the incinerator. I gave away some notes to people who might be able to use them, and I packed up all the poems I have written, and the carbon copy of the *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, and another *Journal* I had kept...and sent it all to Mark Van Doren. Everything else I had written I put in a binder and sent to Lax and Rice.⁸

However, in Merton's personal journal of this time his account differs somewhat as he writes "today I threw the worst novel into the incinerator – both copies" before adding "only kept out a few pages, and I don't know why!"⁹ In recent years a fragment of both "The Straits of Dover" and "The Man in the Sycamore Tree" have come to light along with the greater part of "The Labyrinth."¹⁰ Merton demonstrates here an in-born instinct to preserve his work, an instinct which overrides his avowed vocation at this point of turning his back on the world, to disappear into the monastery and to never write again.

Merton continued to write, encouraged, he would have his reader believe, by a sympathetic Abbot, Frederick Dunne. However Chrysogonus Waddell, a fellow monk at Gethsemani, suggests otherwise. Waddell quotes a memorandum Merton gave Dom Frederic in 1946 outlining various books he, Merton, was hoping to write, including a biography of a Gethsemani monk, obviously Merton himself. Merton suggests a "biography or rather history of the conversion and the Cistercian vocation of a monk of Gethsemani. Born in Europe the son of an artist, this monk passed through the abyss of Communism in the university life of our times before being led to

⁸ *SSM*, 368.

⁹ *RM*, 469.

¹⁰ A near-complete copy of "The Labyrinth" was found in a folder with the erroneous title "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis." A comparison of this copy with a description of "The Labyrinth" by Merton in *Run to the Mountain* confirms this. Pages from "The Straits of Dover" and "The Man in the Sycamore Tree" were found among papers Merton gave to Richard Fitzgerald at St. Bonaventure's before leaving for Gethsemani. (See Mott, pp. 126-7, and *RM*, p. 260.)

the cloister."¹¹ This is a different picture than the one Merton gives of writing under obedience to his abbot. Here Merton is in the driving seat and calling the shots, if I can mix my metaphors to emphasize this point.

The biography Merton suggests to Dom Frederick was eventually published as *The Seven Storey Mountain* and marked the beginning of the Merton industry. Soon after its publication in 1948, Merton received the first of many requests from academic libraries for materials for their special collections. In responding positively to these requests, Merton facilitates, by the early 1950's, the creation of a number of collections still in existence at Boston College, the University of Buffalo, the University of Kentucky along with the previously mentioned collection at St. Bonaventures.

As Merton had been careful to preserve most of his pre-Gethsemani writings, so he continued in the monastery, keeping the majority of his manuscripts, his reading and lecture notes and other materials. However, he was not so rigorous at preserving correspondence he sent and received until the early sixties. As the collection at Bellarmine was being established, it was suggested he keep carbon copies of the letters he was writing, as well as preserving the letters he received. According to Dom Flavian Burns, the abbot of Gethsemani at the time of Merton's death, Merton was careful to keep everything relating to his own life.¹² From these materials Merton responded to the requests he received from academic libraries readily, generously, cheerfully and erratically, and rarely keeping track of where he sent things.

Boston College's collection developed from Merton's friendship with a Jesuit there, Francis Sweeney. After the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Sweeney wrote to Merton asking for a copy of the manuscript. He gave a carbon copy to Terence Connolly, the director of libraries at Boston College, who made the manuscript the centerpiece of a special exhibit. Subsequently he sent all the Merton books he had to Gethsemani to be signed by Merton and begged for additional materials for the collection. The collection was formally opened in February 1949 with a lecture by Merton's friend and mentor, Dan Walsh. Merton continued over the years to correspond with Connolly and other library staff at Boston College, who

¹¹ Ch. Waddell, *Merton and the Tiger Lily*, in: *Merton Annual* 2 (1989), pp. 59-84.

¹² Mott, p. 393.

supplied him with books and information he requested, in return for further donations to their collection.¹³

The collection at the University of Buffalo was started at approximately the same time and most of the materials were donated by Merton in the late nineteen-forties and early nineteen-fifties. In a letter to Lawrence Thompson at the University of Kentucky in 1951 Merton referred to the collection at Buffalo asking Thompson

Do you go in for 'worksheets' like the lads at the University of Buffalo? I sent them a lot of poetry worksheets a couple of years ago. They are especially delighted with anything that is really messy and illegible. Of this I can always furnish an abundance.¹⁴

The collection at the University of Buffalo is largely, as Merton suggests, drafts of poems mostly from his early collections of poetry along with a few much later pieces and some correspondence.

The University of Kentucky's collection was started in 1951 when Dr. Lawrence S. Thompson, the Librarian, wrote to Merton offering to preserve the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or others of his manuscripts. Replying that he had now lived in Kentucky longer than anywhere else, Merton agreed to Thompson's request though noting it was not

because I want to think of myself as a public figure, planning a sheaf of documents about myself where people can write M.A. theses about me and my masterpieces! But, I do have a feeling about being a Kentucky writer.¹⁵

Merton corresponded with Thompson for eleven years, sending him a wealth of material for their Merton collection, frequently in return for the loan of books from the library. Merton's links to Lexington and the University of Kentucky were further developed through his friendship with Victor and Carolyn Hammer. The collection includes manuscripts, galley proofs, notes, or other fragments from forty-two of Merton's major works. Signifi-

¹³ A more detailed analysis of this collection can be found in *The Merton Collection at Boston College* by M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O. in: *The Merton Seasonal* 11.1 (Winter 1986), pp. 8-10.

¹⁴ W.J. Marshall, *The Thomas Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky*, *The Kentucky Review* 7.2 (Summer 1987), p. 145.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

cant runs of correspondence include those between Merton and Erich Fromm, D.T. Suzuki, Boris Pasternak and over one hundred and sixty letters, notes and post cards between Merton and the Hammers. When Merton gave his Pasternak materials to the Library in 1963 he wrote: "I am sending you some more items, including my most valued letters from Pasternak. Take good care of them!"¹⁶

During 1948 Merton became a regular correspondent with Sister Therese Lentfoehr.¹⁷ His letters to her were often accompanied by gifts of materials which would eventually make her collection the largest for many years. Initially Lentfoehr had offered to assist Merton with typing and, over a number of years, prepared various materials for him including drafts of *The Sign of Jonas* and his "Monastic Orientation Notes." As well as keeping carbon copies of things she typed, Merton also frequently sent her manuscripts and other materials he had written, including one of the three original carbons of the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹⁸ Lentfoehr also sought out material about Merton from other sources, aided by Merton who fed her information about people and places which had items of interest – photographs, notebooks, drawings and other materials.¹⁹

In 1962 Lentfoehr sent Merton a "catalogue" of her collection. His response to this provides an insight into the extent of her collection and his own feelings towards such collections:

Your book, for it really is a book, really astonished me. It was quite an "experience" for me, too, and gave me much to reflect on. First of all, the care and perspicacity with which you have handled all that material...I was agreeably surprised to find that long forgotten bits of scraps and poems or even essays I had thought long ago destroyed or lost, all turn up there. It is like the Day of Judgement.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 149.

¹⁷ According to Sr. Therese she first wrote to Merton in 1939 but they did not begin to correspond regularly until 1948. See Th. Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989 (abbreviated to *RJ*), for a selection of Merton's letters to Lentfoehr.

¹⁸ *RJ*, p. 189.

¹⁹ In a letter of May 1950 to her Merton makes reference to her frequent correspondence with his Columbia friends Bob Lax and Ed Rice.

²⁰ *RJ*, pp. 240-241.

After the Bellarmine collection was established in 1963, Merton continued to send materials to Lentfoehr. When she was considering what would eventually become of her collection, he suggested that it could be split between Bellarmine and Marquette University so as to help complete the Bellarmine collection with early material he had sent her. In the end, her entire collection was donated to Columbia University to form the core of their collection.

In 1963 Merton was approached by Msgr. Alfred Horrigan and Fr. John Loftus, the president and dean of Bellarmine College in Louisville, Kentucky with a proposal to create a collection at Bellarmine. With the approval of his abbot, Dom James Fox, the proposal was approved and the collection was inaugurated on November 10, 1963. The idea was to have a more formal and organized collection, though Merton stipulated that he wished to continue sending some materials to the other, already existing, collections. The nucleus of the collection was formed from materials donated by Merton along with contributions made by Dan Walsh, James Wygal and John Loftus. Merton was not present at the ceremonies for the inauguration of the collection but a prepared statement was read by Dan Walsh, who had also been involved in the inauguration ceremony for the Boston College collection. Merton concluded the statement by writing:

Here, then, are some of the reasons why I believe that a Collection like this can have a meaning for us all. For these reasons, whatever may be of interest to you in my work certainly belongs to you by right. I would not feel I was doing you justice in keeping it from you. If, on the other hand, there is much here that is trivial or useless, I trust your indulgence to overlook it and to pray for me. I will pray in a special way for all of you who are here today. May God bless us all, and give all the grace to finish the work that He is asking of us here in the "Church of Louisville."

Shortly after the inauguration Mgr. Horrigan wrote to Merton thanking him for his "memorable gift" and for his statement which, he said, Dan Walsh had "presented with a deep feeling that left none untouched."²¹ The following year the first Merton room was dedicated and, after visiting it, Merton wrote to Horrigan that he thought it was "very well done indeed"

²¹ Mgr. Alfred Horrigan to Thomas Merton. November 15th, 1963.

adding "I thought it a very sober and attractive place, and am ready to take up residence at any time the Father Abbot permits."²²

In 1967 Merton made Bellarmine the official repository for all his work instructing his Trustees to "deposit all my manuscripts, tapes, drawings, photographs and kindred items with Bellarmine College, or its successor in interest, to be kept in The Merton Room at said institution."²³ But, having made that agreement, Merton continued to send materials to other, already existing collections, and to some new ones. In 1967 Syracuse University wrote to Merton requesting materials to start a collection there and Merton responded, generously as ever, by sending them a variety of material including ten of his working notebooks, correspondence, essays and other material.²⁴

As well as the collections already mentioned a number of other collections have developed in the years since Merton's death. The largest of these is at the Houghton Library at Harvard University and resulted from James Laughlin, Merton's friend and publisher, donating his personal papers along with his business papers for New Directions Publishing Corporation to Harvard. Other smaller collections have developed as friends and correspondents of Merton have bequeathed their papers to various institutions – for example, Ed Rice to Georgetown, Dorothy Day to Marquette, Jaques Maritain to Notre Dame and "Ping" Ferry to Dartmouth.²⁵

Bibliography

Besides the development of archival collections, Merton was also involved in research into, and preservation of his materials on a variety of different levels.

Merton cooperated with Frank Dell'Isola in his work of compiling a bibliography of Merton's published work and encouraged Therese Lentfoehr to do likewise. When the bibliography was published in 1956 Merton described it as "on the whole a fine job, fine enough to be embarrassing to me: because it makes it quite evident that with me writing is less a talent than an

²² Thomas Merton to Mgr. Alfred Horrigan. February 25th, 1965.

²³ Merton Legacy Trust Agreement. November 14th, 1967.

²⁴ T. Keenan, *Standing Where Roads Converge: The Thomas Merton Papers at Syracuse University*, in: *Syracuse University Library Associates Courier*, 30 (1995), pp. 157-162.

²⁵ A full listing of such collections can be found at:
<http://www.merton.org/research/othercollections.htm>.

addiction.²⁶ His friend, and initially his official biographer, John Howard Griffin once remarked that Merton could not pick his nose without writing about it. This may seem like a facetious comment but it contains an element of truth which Merton himself recognized writing in his journal that “perhaps I shall continue writing on my deathbed, and even take some asbestos paper with me in order to go on writing in purgatory.”²⁷

Merton continued to cooperate with Frank Dell’Isola and to send him new materials as they were published. As Dell’Isola worked on revising and updating his bibliography in 1965 Merton wrote to him

It is a good idea to get it up to date but is now the time for publishing, especially for the publication of a definitive bibliography? I have several unpublished books moving up slowly in the works, and the usual projects for articles poems and so on. There will be some publication going on quite actively for two or three more years whether I am alive or dead. It is true that I am moving toward a kind of semi retirement into a more complete solitude, and when I settle down in this, the flow of publications will gradually dry up, and any writings I will do will be on a much smaller scale, more personal and perhaps more creative, but in any case a lot less of it. It is possible that one might reasonably plan on a somewhat definitive bibliography for 1970 at the earliest, even if I should have a coronary after mailing this letter.²⁸

Dell’Isola’s revised and expanded bibliography was eventually published in 1975 by Kent State University Press.²⁹

Dissertations and Research

Although *The Seven Storey Mountain* was not published until 1948, Merton’s fame was already beginning to grow with the first book review, a review of *Thirty Poems* appearing in 1944,³⁰ a poem dedicated to him appe-

²⁶ RJ, p. 225.

²⁷ Th. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, London: Hollis & Carter, 1953, p. 227. (Abbreviated to SJ).

²⁸ Thomas Merton to Frank Dell’Isola. June 9th, 1965.

²⁹ F. Dell’Isola, *Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*, Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1975.

³⁰ J.F. Nims, *Two Catholic Poets*. Review of *Thirty Poems* by Thomas Merton and *Land of Unlikeness* by Robert Lowell, in: *Poetry* 65 (October 1944).

aring in 1947,³¹ and the first article, "Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet," appearing in February 1948.³²

In a letter of September 1952 to Sister Therese Lentfoehr Merton responds to a comment she made about preserving materials for future scholars saying it worries him a little and asking "Who says there will be any future scholars, anyway? Forget about preserving these things Sister – it is a vain hope." However by the time Merton is writing this those "future scholars" were already a present reality. The first masters thesis, a "Critical Appreciation of the Poetry of Thomas Merton" had been completed at Boston College in 1950,³³ with three more completed in 1951 and the first doctoral thesis "Thomas Merton: Social Critic of the Times" completed in 1952 at the University of Ottawa.³⁴ By the time of Merton's death there were nineteen theses completed – 15 masters and four doctoral – a small, yet significant, number compared to the hundreds completed since.³⁵

One of the doctoral theses completed in 1968 was by James T Baker.³⁶ Baker had met Merton in 1962 when he was among a group of students at the Baptist Seminary in Louisville who visited with Merton at Gethsemani. Subsequently he went on to study for a Ph.D. at Florida State University and chose Merton for the subject of his dissertation. Baker contacted Merton in September 1967 asking if he could visit him at Gethsemani in the spring of 1968 to discuss his first draft of the thesis. Their correspondence and Merton's comments about Baker in his personal journals are interesting, as they give an insight into Merton's reaction to academic study of his work and the reality of those "future scholars" he had pooh-poohed in his 1952 letter to Lentfoehr.

³¹ F. Sweeney, *Letter to Lancelot (for Thomas Merton)*, in: *Commonweal* 46 (May 9th, 1947).

³² W. Lissner, *Toast of the Avant-Garde: A Trappist Poet*, in: *Catholic World* 166 (February 1948).

³³ M.I. Kelly, "Critical Appreciation of the Poetry of Thomas Merton", master's (Boston College, Boston, Mass., 1950).

³⁴ S. Saint Elizabeth of the Cross, "Thomas Merton, Social Critic of the Times", doctoral (University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada, 1952).

³⁵ A full list of the theses and dissertations so far completed by Thomas Merton is available on the internet at: <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/thomasmerton/theses.htm> – this list is regularly updated as new materials appear.

³⁶ J. Th. Baker, "Thomas Merton: the Spiritual and Social Philosophy of Union" doctoral (Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, 1968).

Although Merton calls Baker's topic "torturous" – Baker had described it in his letter as "a dissertation on the life and thought of Thomas Merton"³⁷ – Merton responded enthusiastically to Baker's initial request by agreeing to meet with him, sending him what he described as "a hotch potch of material...picked out more or less at random, covering all sorts of territory"³⁸ and even offering to make the arrangements for Baker to stay at the monastery guesthouse for his visit. Merton also suggests that Baker visit the Bellarmine collection when he is in Kentucky describing it as a "large collection of mss, mimeographs and general junk." He tells Baker that his problem will "not be lack of material, but finding some kind of sense in all of it."³⁹ Prior to Baker's visit which took place at the end of February 1968, further correspondence was exchanged between them and Merton sent Baker further materials which he thought would be of interest.

In writing to Merton after his visit, Baker expresses his appreciation for Merton's advice and hospitality. He wrote that "our conversation cleared up a number of problems which I had encountered, causing me to change my entire thesis in a couple of chapters but making the work stronger."⁴⁰ Baker completed his thesis in the late spring of 1968 and writes to Merton promising to send him a copy once it is bound, writing "I'm a bit anxious over your response to it. Maybe this is natural" adding "I do hope, however, that you will be able to criticize it so as to make it more accurate than it probably is now."⁴¹

Merton responds in length to Baker upon receiving a copy of his dissertation and his comments are worth quoting in full. Merton wrote:

You have really done courageous work! I never take a census of how much I have written, and always think in terms of much less than is actually there. Your "fifty books" is a figure which does, admittedly, embrace pamphlets, but even then it is a shock to me. You have really had to struggle

³⁷ James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. September 13th, 1967.

³⁸ Thomas Merton to James Th. Baker. September 29th, 1967.

³⁹ In a letter of March 28th, 1968 Merton refers to a local controversy about his support for a conscientious objector who refused the draft adding "one good man said he was about to burn my books. That is one way of disposing of them."

⁴⁰ James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. March 4th, 1968.

⁴¹ James Th. Baker to Thomas Merton. [Undated].

through a mass of stuff, and I think you have done a very good job of organizing it and tracing lines of development: where I find myself wondering about the material it is almost always because I am disagreeing with some of my own ideas. The only "corrections" I would suggest would be matters of insignificant detail...In the main, I am astonished that you were able to make sense out of such a variety of materials.

Naturally I want to thank you for the care you have taken with the work, but also for the insights which it can provide for me. It is very useful to me to see an evaluation of my work as a whole. It gives me some perspective on it, and I suppose the thing that strikes me most is that I have said so much that was premature, provisional, and in many ways inadequate. I am surprised that people have received those ideas, on the whole, with more respect than they deserved. I have certainly had unfriendly critics, but on the whole my work has been accepted with sympathy. And of course I do feel it to be significant that much of the sympathetic understanding has come from Protestants – and that the first dissertation is by a Baptist.⁴²

A couple of days after writing to Baker Merton comments on Baker's study in his personal journal in a more introspective tone saying he was depressed by it as it "showed me clearly so many limitations in my work. So much that has been provisional, inconclusive, half-baked. I have always said too much, too soon."⁴³

"I Will Last...I Will be a Person Studied and Commented On"

In 1967, as Merton prepared to set up his Literary Trust, he began more formally gathering together materials to be deposited at Bellarmine describing the process as both "a comedy" and "a problem" adding:

⁴² Thomas Merton to James Th. Baker. June 11th, 1968. Merton's final comment that "the first dissertation is by a Baptist" is incorrect and suggests that he was not aware of the other academic research that had already been completed on him. This quotation, from a previously unpublished letter, is used by permission of the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust.

⁴³ Th. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998, p. 129. (Abbreviated to OSM.)

I like it and cooperate whole-heartedly because I imagine it is for real. That I will last. That I will be a person, studied and commented on.⁴⁴

Both Merton's Literary Trust and the collection at Bellarmine, along with other collections around the country, point to his concern at preserving his work so his story could be studied and told. Writing in his journal in November 1967, as the Trust was about to be agreed, he again stressed this concern saying:

What is left over after my death (and there is bound to be plenty!) might as well get published. I have no guarantee of living many more years.⁴⁵

Merton also saw advantages in having his materials stored in different places as he says, it "will not all be destroyed if an accident happens to one of them"⁴⁶ – once again stressing from another angle his concern for his work to be preserved.

As Merton prepared to set up his trust, death, which had been prominent in his writings the previous year, continued in the forefront of his mind.⁴⁷ In July Victor Hammer died, followed, in September, by Ad Reinhardt and John Slate, Merton's legal advisor as he set up his Legacy Trust. Slate's death gave "a sense of urgency to the slow process of setting up a trust."⁴⁸ The idea of setting up a trust must have contributed to keeping the fact of death at the front of Merton's mind and he wrote in his journal after he heard of Slate's death: "I know I too must go soon and must get things in order. Making a will is not enough, and getting manuscripts in order is not enough."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Th. Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, ed. by Christine M. Bochen, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997, p. 264. (Abbreviated to *Learning*).

⁴⁵ *OSM*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Th. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994, p. 175. (Abbreviated to *WF*).

⁴⁷ Death featured as a refrain in *I Always Obey My Nurse*, it was one of *Seven Words* that Merton wrote for Ned O'Gorman (Th. Merton, *Love and Living*, London: Sheldon Press, 1979, p. 97). It was a prominent theme in *The Geography of Lograire* besides featuring in his spiritual writings and holding a key place in his understanding of the role of the monk in the modern world.

⁴⁸ Mott, p. 499.

⁴⁹ *Learning*, p. 293.

With the collection at Bellarmine on his mind Merton was reading Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*. Bachelard spoke of *demeures* "places where living takes place" and as Michael Mott points out for "Ruth Merton's son, immediate surroundings had always been of near-obsessive importance." Place and surroundings played an important part in Merton's life and writings over the years and were to be important in *Lograire* which he was writing at this time. Bachelard's book led Merton to question "his own *demeures*,"⁵⁰ his own place, concluding that the hermitage was his true place whereas the Merton Room at Bellarmine was false, he called it a "bloody cocoo's nest"; a "typical image of my own stupid lifelong homelessness, rootlessness," a "place where I store away endless papers, in which a paper-self builds its nest to be visited by strangers in a strange land of unreal intimacy." He regarded the Merton Room as a cell where his papers lived but not him and he wrote that the Merton Room and the trust were all "futile – a non-survival...A last despairing childish effort at love for some unknown people in some unknown future."⁵¹

Even though Merton could call the Room and Trust futile and regard them as a way of avoiding death so that a part of him lived on, it was also, I would suggest, a necessary part of him. Before joining Gethsemani he burned many of his papers, giving some to friends to keep and later publishing them. He continued throughout his monastic life to ensure the survival of his work, sending it to Lentfoehr, to other collectors, and also, later on, keeping carbon copies of his letters and allowing his monastic conferences to be recorded. Once again there is a paradox here in Merton; seeing all his written work as futile whilst at the same time seeking to preserve it; burning his papers before joining Gethsemani and yet entrusting some to others. Among the papers he entrusted to others before entering the monastery was *My Argument With the Gestapo* which Merton once again attempts to get published in the very year he sees his endless papers as a form of "non-survival."⁵² The same was true of *Lograire*. At the same time as writing in his personal journal about the Merton Room he was "taking greater care than ever that tapes and drafts of the new poem should be preserved in case

⁵⁰ Mott, p. 500.

⁵¹ *Learning*, pp. 296-7.

⁵² *Ibidem*. Merton was also suggesting to his agent that it would be a good idea to bring out "all the autobiographical stuff in one fat book." *WF*, p. 150.

he died before the work was complete.”⁵³ He wrote to his friend “Ping” Ferry that “a publishable text, even though imperfect” of *Lograire* could be made from the tapes “if I drop dead or something” before completing it.⁵⁴

Following the journal entry of October 1967, where Merton speaks of his papers living in the Merton Room but not himself, Merton goes on to speak of his writing saying: “When I reveal most I hide most” adding “there is still something I have not said: but what it is I don’t know, and maybe I have to say it by not saying.”⁵⁵ A comment made by John Howard Griffin, Merton’s friend and first official biographer, in a letter to Elena Malits supports Merton here. Griffin, commenting on the difference between Merton’s private journals and his published journals, said:

I have come to one overwhelming realization, which is that Thomas Merton kept what was most important hidden except to the pages of his private journals. Even those books...that are based on his journals, are actually edited and not by any means exact transcriptions; and in them he draws that firm line beyond which he will not actually reveal himself.⁵⁶

Merton continually recorded his own story and from that record worked up for publication the parts he wished to share. But, through his Literary Trust, Merton ensured that all his writings would be preserved and also made provision for the eventual publication of his private journals and correspondence, no sooner than twenty-five years after his death.

Merton’s decision to set up a Literary Trust shows his understanding of his work within the larger professional literary field. He was a published author, “the one original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western World”⁵⁷ as he once mockingly described himself. He was in touch with many other authors, with literary agents and publishers, and he would have been aware of the need both for the monastery and his publishers to

⁵³ Mott, p. 500.

⁵⁴ Th. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985, p. 235.

⁵⁵ *Learning*, p. 297.

⁵⁶ E. Malits, “Journey into the Unknown: Thomas Merton’s Continuing Conversion”, doctoral (Fordham University, 1974), ix.

⁵⁷ Th. Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer*, ed. by Jonathan Montaldo, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, p. 64.

have a Literary Trust of some description to take care of his literary estate after his death.

Initially Merton turned to John Slate, a Columbia classmate who was an aviation lawyer, to assist with the legal side of setting up his Trust. Merton appointed Naomi Burton, his literary agent, James Laughlin, his publisher at New Directions, and Tommie O'Callaghan a Kentucky friend who was local to Bellarmine and the Merton Room, as his literary trustees. After the death of Slate in September 1967 John Ford, a Louisville lawyer, completed the Trust agreement which was signed on November 14th, 1967. The Trust agreement made provision for the eventual publication, at the discretion of the Trustees, of every single thing that Merton ever wrote. The only limitations Merton placed on the Trustees were that they never allow any of Merton's autobiographical materials to be filmed or dramatized and that no contract should be agreed without the consent of a representative of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Conclusion

Immediately prior to leaving for the West Coast and Asia in September 1968, Merton made a final visit to the Merton Room at Bellarmine to give some further guidance and assistance to the staff, then spent his last night in Kentucky in St. Bonaventure Hall, the Franciscan Friary on the campus. It was during this final visit that the apocryphal story arose of Merton making the derogatory remark that the Merton Room was "a good place to cut a fart and run." (Mott, xxvi) This remark, if true, highlights his diffidence and, at times almost embarrassment, at the "official" interest in him – collections at academic institutions, and a subject of research and scholarship – an "official" interest he also loved at other times. Gregory Zilboorg was not too far from the truth when he suggested Merton wanted "a hermitage in Times Square with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT.'"⁵⁸

Merton, whatever he may have said, was responsible for the existence of collections of his materials at numerous institutions and also in the setting up of the Merton Room at Bellarmine and the Merton Legacy Trust. As a result of this, hardly a year has gone past since his death 35 years ago without the publication of new primary material by him – poetry, essays, letters and journals, with a growing number of foreign translations of his

⁵⁸ Mott, p. 297.

works. The secondary literature of books, theses, articles and other materials about him continues to grow with much work remaining to be done. For example, few studies have been made of his poetry and so far very little use has been made of his recently published letters and complete journals. A thriving Merton Society now exists in the United States with other, smaller societies around the world, many generating their own publications.

When Merton wrote in 1967 that "I will last... I will be a person studied and commented on" it is hard to imagine Merton understood to what extent that would be true. Thirty-five years after his untimely death the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, along with other smaller Merton collections around the United States, continue to be places of discovery, fostering a continuing reinterpretation and representation of Merton's work. Thomas Merton may no longer be the archivist, but the corpus he bequeathed to seekers everywhere continues to speak and find a receptive audience.

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