

All Things to All Men Merton as Letter-Writer

by
Ian Thomson

To be detached from all systems, and without rancor towards them, but with insight and compassion. To be truly "Catholic" is to be able to enter into everybody's problem and joys and be all things to all men.¹

When Thomas Merton finished *Seven Story Mountain* in 1948, his publisher sent review copies to several prominent writers, amongst them Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Waugh was enthusiastic about the book although he felt it required drastic revision before it could appeal to an English readership. In his first letter to Waugh, written in August 1948, Merton responds to comments he had made about *Seven Story Mountain*:

... I am in a difficult spot here as a writer. Father Abbot gives me a typewriter and says "write" and so I cover pages and pages with matter and they go to several different censors and get lost, torn up, burned, and so on. Then they get pieced together and retyped and go to a publisher who changes everything and after about four years a book appears in print. I never get a chance to discuss it with anybody and scarcely ever see any reviews and half the time I haven't the faintest idea whether the thing is good or bad or what it is. Therefore I need criticism the way a man dying of thirst needs water.²

Waugh went on to edit the English edition of *Seven Story Mountain* which was published as *Elected Silence*. Merton clearly had immense respect for him as a writer and dedicated his next book, *Waters of Siloe*, to him. In his response, Waugh thanked Merton for the dedication and went on to criticise points about the book and its successor, *Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton replied:

.... Your comments on the structure of *Waters* are true. The book is now being read in the refectory and I am aware that the pattern bombing, as you call it, is even worse than in the *Mountain*. It would be a great deal tidier and better to get direct hits, as you say. Still, I know that in my spiritual reading,

I am generally glad to find the same thing said over again three or four times and in three or four different ways. I think this is a characteristic of many people who try to say something about the spiritual life – not a virtue perhaps, but a characteristic fault. . . . You know that slang is almost part of my nature. I shall, however, set myself to avoid it in at least one book, and see how it turns out.³

The influence of James Joyce and of Merton's own contemporaries, avant-garde writers published by New Directions in New York in the 1940s and early 1950s, affected Merton's technique as a writer ... as can be seen in the style of this letter written in 1939 to his close friend and fellow poet, Bob Lax ...

Okay more tinsel thoughts occur to me from yesterday's visit to the Museum of Modern Art. Oh boy some picasso called seated woman oh hoy some picasso hoyhoy dancedance hoyhoyhoy. Similar dances for the cezannes and all the other picassos and at least one Juan Gris, and even one chirico and was happied up by the Miro's okay, and one stuart davis sure good yeah, fine. That reminds me I seen [Ad] Reinhardt for two minutes one hot afternoon all busy and gay his girl who reminds me on a hot day of Quinn sitting and watching him work, then in come some dry communists with their usual sheaf of tickets (printed on blotting paper) for gay boat rides down the bay on the ss susquehanna one buck, so I gone away again and bought some rubber cement but didn't get so encouraged by that either.⁴

Merton and Waugh clearly came from very different stables. Yet Waugh *was* impressed by Merton's autobiographical material and in particular the letters he received from him. Early in their relationship he advised the monk:

... to put books aside and write serious letters and to make an art of it.⁵

This was awkward advice for Merton in the 1940's. Letter writing was not a part of the Trappist tradition. Apart from writing to publishers, most of Merton's correspondence at this stage was with his superiors or other monks and concerned spiritual matters and his problems as both monk and writer. In a letter written to his superior, Abbot Frederic Dunne, in March 1944, he writes:

As our profession is drawing close, I suppose I ought to have something to say for myself, although really I can't find anything that is not simply trivial. If it is a question of telling you what great progress in virtue I have made - I simply don't know whether I have made any progress or not, and seem to have no way of telling. But over and above that, there is nothing that disgusts me more than trying to analyze myself, and paying attention to my "progress" *Regnum Dei non venit cum servatione* [The Kingdom of God comes not with observation].⁶

Five years later he is writing to Dom Frederic's successor, Abbot James Fox, in a less formal style, but expressing very much the same sentiments . . .

Another protocol from Chop Suey Louie, the mad Chinese poet.

It is just to say that I am picturing that immediate goal that Dr. de Quevedo [visiting psychiatrist] wants us all to aim at. What is it? It is this: a very obscure, quiet, unknown, unnoticed monk: a little guy who goes quietly around without attracting any attention for anything whatever, not complaining about anything and not expressing opinions, doing what he is told and being completely docile and blank as far as the exterior goes - except of course for a happy sort of an expression. I want to be as near as possible to nothing and nobody in the community - and everywhere else too - as a monk can possibly be. The reason for my wanting this is that I am altogether sick of myself and I want to do everything I can to cease existing as an ego outside of God.⁷

By this time Merton is already being attracted towards life as a hermit. A letter to a Carthusian in England reveals a little of the conflict he was experiencing:

Perhaps you have heard some rumor of the awful notoriety that has descended upon me as the result of having suddenly become a "best seller" as an author. My Superiors - meaning especially the late dear Dom Frederic, God rest his soul - had me write a book which happened to be my own story. I wrote it, for better or for worse, and it has already sold two hundred thousand copies. An English edition, [*Elected Silence*], somewhat chastened by the critical talent of Evelyn Waugh, has now appeared . . . What is stranger still, a book on contemplation which is strictly ascetic and mystical and in no sense popular [*Seeds of Contemplation*] is now being devoured by the public of this land, selling especially in Hollywood, of all places. I utterly give up trying to understand what is going on.

Perhaps you can guess, dear Father, that, all joking aside, this situation is extremely painful for me and is the occasion of a deep interior struggle which makes me ask myself if I can possibly continue in an atmosphere of such activity in which, for instance, one is liable to be called up on the telephone by newspaper reporters and in which a house full of retreatants is thirsting for autographs. Please remember me in your prayers, and perhaps your Venerable Father Prior would also pray for me. I cannot be more explicit but he will understand, I am sure. My vocation is contemplative and I simply *must* fulfill it.⁸

Merton was to put out yet more feelers towards the Carthusians and Camoldeuse yet he remained to the end a Cistercian. For this, credit must in part be due to his superiors, particularly Abbot James Fox. Whatever his motives may have been, Abbot Fox did his level best to meet Merton's needs, culminating in the early sixties with the building of the hermitage at Gethsemani. Much earlier than this were the days of solitude that he granted to Merton. In October 1951 Merton wrote a report to his abbot which offers a fascinating insight into the spiritual development of a contemplative:

. . . As the week went on, and especially on the last long day in the woods, something else, something deep, began to get a grip on me inside. Whereas in the beginning everything had been simple, restful, peaceful prayer (not sensibly consoled, but quiet and nice) now something began to get hold of me deep down in the roots of my being. I will not call it fear, but it produced a kind of fear - nothing tangible: but I began to feel terrifically *empty* as if I was all burnt out inside and a chasm was opening out in my soul. I lost all taste for the natural pleasure which accompanied my solitude. On Saturday the woods were most beautiful, and yet I could hardly look at anything. The attitude in my mind can be summed up something like this. I was feeling (and still do a little, the day after) the way someone must feel on his deathbed, when he has to leave everything. . .

. . . But all this had very great fruits. Established in this solitude I just wasn't able to work up any interest in things that usually draw my mind away from prayer. At the same time, when I returned to choir, the *office seemed to become just what it ought to be*, my mind was clear and although I drew no special light from the psalms it was a great comfort to be able to sing them to God and to give Him something thereby - something that faith tells me pleases Him.⁹

As the years went by, the mail from enthusiastic readers began to build up and the circle of friends with whom he corresponded grew wider and wider. By the early 1960's, Merton's letter writing had become so extensive that of itself it would establish him as a writer of distinction. According to Tommie O' Callaghan, one of the trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust, Merton left behind more than 1800 files of correspondence. This was in addition to some 60 books and more than 300 essays, articles and excerpts from books published in his lifetime. A comment from his official biographer, Michael Mott ...

Merton complained more and more about the volume of his mail. His novices helped him, retyping articles and much else that slows up the writer who is unlikely to have an intelligent and willing "typing pool" at his or her disposal without cost. He typed almost all his own letters himself, "like a newspaperman with four fingers," typing rapidly, usually very accurately, on a manual typewriter.¹⁰

Echoed by Jim Forest at the Southampton Conference last year ...

I have never in my life, and I am a writer, I'm a journalist, I've worked with writing people on close terms for most of my adult life, I've never seen anybody write with the speed of Merton. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that it was as if the paper caught on fire passing through the big mechanical typewriter that was sitting on the desk in the room adjacent to the room where he gave his lectures to the novices. It just flew through the typewriter being covered at high speed with letters from the alphabet as it passed and sort of dented the ceiling. Just an unbelievably quick mind and the ability to organise his thoughts and to express them verbally at a speed which I have never seen anybody come close to ...¹¹

By the early 1960's Merton had extended his contacts way beyond the Catholic tradition. He began with seminars for Protestant ministers at Gethsemani in the late 50's. By 1961, he had renewed his acquaintanceship with the church of his youth in England in correspondence with the Anglicans, Etta Gullick and our president, Canon Donald Allchin. Just how far Merton travelled on the road to communion with people of differing traditions can be seen in the letters he exchanged with a Sufi from Pakistan, Abdul Aziz, to whom he had been introduced by the French Catholic scholar, Louis Massignon, an acknowledged authority on Islam and Sufism ...

Nov.1960

As one spiritual man to another (if I may so speak in all humility), I speak to you from my heart of our obligation to study the truth in deep prayer and meditation, and bear witness to the light that comes from the All-Holy God into this world of darkness where He is not known and not remembered. The world we live in has become an awful void, a desecrated sanctuary, reflecting outwardly the emptiness and blindness of the hearts of men who have gone crazy with their love for money and power and with pride in their technology. May your work on the Sufi mystics make His Name known and remembered, and open the eyes of men to the light of His truth. . .¹⁴

May 13 1961

... Let us in any case have great love for Truth and open our hearts to the Spirit of God our Lord and Father, Compassionate and Merciful. He alone is Real, and we have our reality only as a gift from Him at every moment. And at every moment it is our joy to be realized by Him over an abyss of nothingness: but the world has turned to the abyss and away from Him Who Is. That is why we live in dreadful times, and we must be brothers in prayer and worship no matter what may be the doctrinal differences that separate our minds.¹⁵

Dec 1962

... The question of detachment depends it seems to me first of all on self-knowledge. Or rather the two are mutually interdependent. One must know what are the real attachments in his soul before he can effectively work against them, and one must have a detached will in order to see the truth of one's attachments. In practice, the events of life bring us face to face, in painful situations, with the places in which we are attached to our inner egoism. Exterior detachment is easier: it is a matter of renouncing comforts and gratifications of the sensual appetites, and this renunciation is of course essential. It has, however, a certain measure which differs in each person, according to his condition and his needs. One must handle this question with prudent discretion. But inner detachment centers around the "self" especially in one's pride, one's desire to react and to defend or to assert "self" in one's own will. This attachment to the self is a fertile sowing ground for seeds of blindness, and from this most of our errors proceed.¹⁶

This concern with 'self' - with the need for detachment and simplicity - are themes which return again and again in his letters - and particularly in his lengthy correspondence with Daisetz Suzuki, who once said that Merton had grasped the essence of Zen better than any other Westerner he had ever come across.

March 12, 1959

Perhaps you are accustomed to receiving letters from strangers. I hope so, because I do not wish to disturb you with a bad-mannered intrusion. I hope a word of explanation will reconcile you to the disturbance, if it is one. The one who writes to you is a monk, a Christian, and so-called contemplative of a rather strict Order. A monk, also, who has tried to write some books about the contemplative life and who, for better or worse, has a great love of and interest in Zen. I will not be so foolish as to pretend to you that I understand Zen. To be frank, I hardly understand Christianity. And I often feel that those who think they know all about the teachings of Christ and of His church are not as close to the target as they think. And I think, too, that many of the Americans who are excited about Zen are perhaps dealing with something in their own imagination, and not with a reality.

All I know is that when I read your books - and I have read many of them - and above all when I read English versions of the little verses in which the Zen masters point their finger to something which flashed out at the time, I feel a profound and intimate agreement. Time after time, as I read your pages, something in me says, "That's it!" Don't ask me what. I have no desire to explain it to anybody, or to justify it to anybody, or to analyze it for myself. I have my own way to walk, and for some reason or other Zen is right in the middle of it wherever I go . . . So there it is, with all its beautiful purposelessness, and it has become very familiar to me though I do not know "what it is." Or even if it is an it. Not to be foolish and multiply words, I'll say simply that it seems to me that Zen is the very atmosphere of the Gospels, and the Gospels are bursting with it. It is the proper climate for any monk, no matter what kind of monk he may be. If I could not breathe Zen I would probably die of spiritual asphyxiation. But I still don't know what it is. No matter. I don't know what the air is either.¹⁷

Many of us who have read Merton's own letters will probably have had exactly the same experience . . .

Another letter ... Zen in daily life ...

April 11 1959

. . . I occasionally meet my own kind of Zen master, in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on a fence post suddenly took off after a wasp, dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the same position on the fence post as if nothing had ever happened. A brief split-second lesson in Zen. If I only knew some Japanese I would put it into a haiku, but in English the seventeen syllables somehow seem to have no justification except as translations from Japanese. But the gist of it would be that the birds never stop to say "I missed" because, in fact, whether they catch the wasp or not, they never miss, and neither does Zen. We in the West are the ones with the hit-or-miss outlook on life, and so we hit and we miss. And in both cases the results are likely to be tragic. I fear our successes more than our failures.¹⁸

By late 1961/1962, Merton had moved onto controversial ground with the publication of a sequence of articles and poems on the issues of war and racial justice. These caused a deal of fuss and opposition, not least from amongst more conservative fellow Catholics. By May 1962 matters had grown to a head. Merton was instructed by his superiors to stop all publication of anything on war. As it happens, he had already made plans to issue his Cold War Letters for private circulation in mimeographed form.

Merton's mission to get his views known in spite of the opposition of the establishment echoes that of *Samizdat* writers and thinkers across the great divide in Soviet Russia. And it evidently worked. By 1964, Merton was allowed to publish several of these letters as well as essays on war, peace and race relations in the book, *Seeds of Destruction*.

This is perhaps the moment to introduce Merton's letters to one of his most celebrated correspondents, Boris Pasternak. Merton first wrote to the Russian writer in August 1958, before reading *Dr. Zhivago*, and spoke of his deep kinship with him ...

Although we are separated by great distances and even greater barriers it gives me pleasure to speak to you as to one whom I feel to be a kindred mind. We are both poets - you a great one and I a very minor one ... It may surprise you when I say, in all sincerity, that I feel much more kinship with you, in your writing, than I do with most of the great modern writers in the West. That is to say that I feel that I can share your experience more deeply and with a greater intimacy and sureness, than that of writers like [James]

Joyce whom I nevertheless so well like and understand. But when you write of your youth in the Urals, in Marburg, in Moscow, I feel as if it were my own experience, as if I were you. With other writers I can share ideas, but you seem to communicate something deeper. It is as if we met on a deeper level of life on which individuals are not separate beings . . . ¹⁹

Pasternak replied in September 1958, thanking Merton for the "congenial" letter, which seemed to him to be "wonderfully filled with kindred thoughts as having been written half by myself." In October, he wrote again to thank Merton for the copy of his *Prometheus* that he had sent him. Merton's reply, expressing great admiration for *Dr. Zhivago*, was written on October 23rd, 1958, the day Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In the letter Merton describes his famous dream of Proverb, whom he likened to Lara.

One night I dreamt that I was sitting with a very young Jewish girl of fourteen or fifteen, and that she suddenly manifested a very deep and pure affection for me and embraced me so that I was moved to the depths of my soul. I learned that her name was "Proverb", which I thought very simple and beautiful. And also I thought: "She is of the race of Saint Anne". I spoke to her of her name, and she did not seem to be proud of it, because it seemed that the other young girls mocked her for it. But I told her that it was a very beautiful name, and there the dream ended. A few days later when I happened to be in a nearby city [Louisville], which is very rare for us, I was walking alone in the crowded street and suddenly saw that everybody was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were and were perhaps ashamed of their names - because they were mocked on account of them. And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from before the beginning, was playing in His sight all days, playing in the world. ²⁰

Pasternak turned down the offer of the Nobel Prize - it would have meant his leaving his beloved Russia for good. He was to die just two years later.

During his lifetime, Merton wrote a large number of letters to young people. As Bob Daggy points out in his introduction to *Road to Joy*, Merton felt a special closeness to the young and his letters reveal the empathy which he and they both felt. Writing to the Quaker, June Yungblut, in 1967, he refers to a letter he had received from a girl in California.

.... I got a lovely mad letter from a sixteen-year-old girl in California, saying she and a friend were running an "underground paper" and wanted me to send them something. They sounded very Beatle-struck, and suggested as subjects for me, besides "fight the baddy baddies," that I might also "promote Lennonism." So I sent them a piece of a new poetry-prose mosaic that I think New Directions is doing next spring. I don't know if it promotes Lennonism, but perhaps it is tinged with Dylanism. ²¹

Merton's reply to the girl, Suzanne Butorovich was written on June 22nd 1967,

. . . I like underground movements and publications, they are irresistible, So I send you a piece of my new book, coming out next Spring I think ["Prayer to the Computer" from *Cables to the Ace*]. It is a mosaic of prose and poetry, experimental, and pieces of it are being published in US, England and Mexico in literary magazines. So now maybe it will fit in to your underground paper, too. Take what you want: don't take all of this selection unless you like it all. Maybe you won't like any, but if you listen to it right, you probably will. It is a bit Dylan-like in spots because I love Bobby D. I have lots of his stuff here and what do you think I am: six hundred years old or something, that I don't know Paul McCartney is a Beatle? I have their record of "Revolver" - only one I have. I like them fine. ²²

But his letters to young people were not always so casual. Take this one to "John", who had been experimenting with LSD ...

On one level, there is your LSD experience and various ones of mine, and it seems to me that these are universal, natural and normal: the experience of *being* in the ontological sense, in all its ontological (metaphysical) richness, in its full existential reality, its concreteness, its value, bla bla, whatever words you want to use.

Into this level of experience the notion of "God" enters either equivocally (as for you) or analogically (as for me). In any case, one can rationalize about God and the relation of the cosmos to Him, or one can so to speak identify this being we experience with His being, and sum the whole thing up as you do with "this is IT". And that is true to a certain extent, it is IT. And yet at the same time and in the same breath it is NOT IT. There is a built-in equivocation in this identification of the being we are capable of knowing and experiencing, with God, the Absolute Being. Hence no matter what anybody says, in religious terms, in philosophical terms, whatever terms you like, whenever he talks of being and existence that come within our

experience, whether with the help of LSD or not, it is both IT and NOT IT. You are perfectly right in saying that what you attain by LSD is not God: it is you. But you are in the image of God . . . ²⁴

In an utterly different vein . . . this letter to an English boy of 12, Arthur Harris, the son of a fellow correspondent with Pasternak:

Since, as you realize, I conduct an immense and sinister traffic in hallucinogenic drugs and Argentinean soccer players and since this traffic has ramifications in five continents and many large and small islands, my secret agents everywhere keep me well provided with STAMPS. Thus it is not difficult for me to send you from time to time a few of these, some of which are still impregnated with opiates, others scrawled with secret information concerning interplanetary wars. Please give my kind regards to your estimable father whom we in the transcontinental dope ring regard as a most deadly sleuth.

Sincerely yours, X127 (alias Thomas Merton) ²⁵

Each of these letters to young people is utterly distinctive in style and all are completely different to the other letters we've looked at. As John Wu Jr pointed out at the Southampton Conference.

He seemed to write to each person on the plane that the person could be receptive. And this is, I think, extremely important. Mertonbecame a teenager when he was writing those letters [to me]. It's a kind of compassion I think and now that I'm in my fifties I try to do that too. ²⁶

or as Jim Forest put it later in the same discussion ... " ... this gift Merton had to write to people from almost within their own skin ..." ²⁷

The elaborate courtesy of his letters to Aziz, the simplicity and directness of his writing to Suzuki, the measured formality he adopted in communicating with his superiors in Rome, the exuberance, sheer fun and understanding he revealed in his letters to young people . . . in every letter, Merton establishes an area of agreement - of empathy - unique to each correspondent. Thus he appears to us to speak in many dialects, to take up many different and sometimes contradictory points of view. But that, I am convinced, is an illusion.

Having ventured into the silence that lies beyond the world of doctrine, he saw no reason to change his own position within that world. In terms of Roman Catholic doctrine, he remained utterly orthodox to the end.

We hear his own private voice perhaps most clearly in his correspondence with Bob Lax and Rosemary Radford Reuther, letters in which he articulates his own particular dilemmas and frustrations. First, part of a letter to Bob Lax — himself, by now, living a hermit-like existence in the Greek Islands . . .

Mar. 5, 1964

.... You have made me muse, you understand. You have brought about a flood of these surmises and poetic trains of thought. But all is not poesy in my strange life of sadness, facts, events, proses, newspops, flashbacks, inopportune memories, corrections, restatements, retractions, mulling over the weekend, saying what was never said, hearing what was never meant to be understood. One of the saddest facts of my factual existence is that I am in perpetual trouble with the hoodwinks and the curials, with the bonzes and scrabs, with the imperial tomes and the forthwith communicado from the Vaste Curie. It comes to me with tubes from the eternal city a constant flood of reprehension and surveillance and I am under the wraps, forced into the corners, smoked out of my den, smoked back into the wrong dam den, never know where I am next . . . ²⁸

Just as deeply felt, his correspondence with Rosemary Radford Reuther who had challenged him to come out of the monastery and do his stuff where the real demons are . . . in the inner cities and amongst the disadvantaged . . .

March 19, 1967

.... Certainly the demons down here are small-time. But it is by confronting them that a monk has to open the way to his own kind of involvement in the big-time struggle, or, as Vahanian said the other day, to be effectively iconoclastic in the modern world. I am personally keenly aware that if I threw up the sponge down here and went out to engage in something ostensibly more effective, it would be a real betrayal not of abstract obligations but of the Kingdom, in which the monastic life, however marginal, retains its importance. In many ways I would prefer to simplify the question, take

matters into my own hands, and get going. On the other hand I observe so many people in the monastic Order doing this and ending up in the most ridiculous futilities - far worse than the ones against which they are protesting. Maybe there is a kairos coming, but I have no notion where or when: I am in the most uncomfortable and unenviable position of waiting without any justification, without a convincing explanation, and without any assurance except that it seems to be what God wants of me and that this kind of desperation is what it means for me to be without idols - I hope ...²⁹

I began with Merton's correspondence with Evelyn Waugh, during which Waugh did so much to help Merton sharpen and develop his skills. Waugh may have been the more accomplished writer but read his letters and you are always aware of his personality, his opinions and his prejudices in the background. Witty, amusing, occasionally waspish, it is all very much Evelyn Waugh on Evelyn Waugh's terms. Read Merton and you read Merton on the terms of the person he is writing to. All his considerable skill is deployed in opening up that common ground essential to truly spiritual and inter-personal communication ... the hidden ground.

As he wrote in 1967 to Dr Amiya Chakravarty, Indian poet, philosopher and teacher and his students in Massachusetts

... It is not easy to try to say what I know I cannot say. I do really have the feeling that you have all understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious - and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma ... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourselves engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations. I suppose what makes me most glad is that we all recognize each other in this metaphysical space of silence and happiness, and get some sense, for a moment, that we are full of paradise without knowing it.³⁰

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