

# Foreword

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With the negative picture Thomas Merton paints of Montauban and Cambridge in *The Seven Storey Mountain* the important influence of Europe on his life and thought is all too frequently disregarded. Yet, as David Scott wrote in his poem 'The Hermitage, Gethsemani (1964)', referring to that time at Cambridge, 'what he would come to see as sin, was the culture God grew warm in,'<sup>1</sup> a culture that would influence Merton for the remainder of his life.

It is too easily forgotten that, although Merton's life can neatly be divided between close to 27 years in the world, followed by 27 years to the day in the cloister, he was, for the greater part of his life a British citizen, only taking on United States citizenship in June 1951. It is endlessly overlooked that the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was indeed British, not American, and had spent his most formative years in Europe.

Thomas Merton, writing in *The Secular Journal* of his first visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani in April 1941, describes Gethsemani as the center of America. Yet for most Americans in 1941 the exact opposite was more likely the case and, for many, remains closer to the truth today too. Paul Elie in *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* suggests that Gethsemani was the closest thing Merton could find in the United States at that time to medieval France and also to his childhood memories, of the few short years in his young life when he had both a home and a family. 'How extraordinary,' Elie writes, 'his imagination must have been to see it the way he saw it – as the center of the universe, a stray shard of medieval France, a Kentucky equivalent

of an outpost of prayer in the Himalayas.<sup>2</sup> The Gethsemani of 1941 may have appeared medieval in the United States at that time, but nowadays, viewed from the 21st century, as one reviewer of Elie's book commented, the Gethsemani of that era is so removed from our current world that it now seems 'extraterrestrial today.'<sup>3</sup>

It is truly extraordinary to think how, from within the enclosed medieval cloister of the Abbey of Gethsemani – in a remote rural area of Kentucky, a still segregated southern state, home of Fort Knox that quintessential symbol of American military power and wealth, far off the beaten track, without access to newspapers and television – Merton would have his finger on the nation's pulse, indeed the world's pulse, both for his own times and for the coming decades. As one of his correspondents, Catherine Doherty would write to him in July 1963: 'all things reach you, and all news jumps your cloistered walls faster than they enter our open doors.'<sup>4</sup>

This unique ability of Merton's, I believe, was a result of those early formative years in Europe which instilled in him an awareness of the larger world, a world he would initially think he needed to leave at the monastery gate but, in due course, discovered was impossible for him to do. The world, like his author persona, followed Thomas Merton into the cloister; indeed he was to learn that he was in the monastery for the world. With a New Zealand father, an American mother, a French and English education, travel experience in pre-war Europe, mentoring by Tom and Iris Bennett, and a flair for language and literature, Merton had in his early years laid the foundation for his development as a true renaissance man.

There is a synchronicity, a consistency, between Merton's early years, including his time at Cambridge, and the life of the mature monk of the final decade or so of his life. This consistency can best be seen in the semi-autobiographical novels Merton was writing prior to his entry to the monastery, especially *My Argument with the Gestapo*. By the final years of Merton's life he seems keener on *My Argument*

than he is on his autobiography. In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton suggests that the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was dead, not once, but many times,<sup>5</sup> and in the preface to a 1963 translation of *The Seven Storey Mountain* into Japanese he said 'if I were to attempt this book today, it would be written differently ... the story no longer belongs to me.'<sup>6</sup> The contrast with his feelings about *My Argument with the Gestapo*, noted in his journal of early 1968 as he began preparing that book for publication, could not be stronger. He describes it as 'a book I am pleased with' writing that it contains:

good writing and it comes from the center where I have really experienced myself and my life. It represents a very vital and crucial – and fruitful – moment in my existence. Perhaps now I am returning to some such moment of breakthrough.<sup>7</sup>

Or again, telling his godfather and Columbia classmate Ed Rice in a letter of August 1967, that it was 'a real good book, one of the best I have done.'<sup>8</sup>

This consistency does not undermine Merton's autobiography, as the truth expected of an autobiography is different to that expected from a biography, which is concerned with facts and the reconstruction of a life. The concern of autobiography is not with the events recalled but with the person those events have formed, 'more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past.'<sup>9</sup> So, in his autobiography, Merton gives the reader his experience from the standpoint he has reached. When Merton distorts the truth the distortions can be 'as revealing as the truth.'<sup>10</sup> Thus Merton's presentation of his time in Europe in his autobiography serves to contrast his metaphor of hell, descriptive of his life at that stage, with his later metaphor of Gethsemani as paradise. By emphasizing his embrace of life at Gethsemani, in opposition to the life he believed he had renounced and left behind, Merton clearly demonstrates the standpoint he has adopted.

References to England in Merton's novels are much more positive than those in his autobiography and even at times have a tone not dissimilar to later journal entries at Gethsemani. So, in *The Straits of Dover* for example, Merton speaks of his early attraction to solitude during his years at Oakham, spending time on his own, going to Brooke Hill to

walk, or sit, up there for hours, not waiting for anything or looking for anything or expecting anything, but simply looking out over the wide valley, and watching the changes of the light across the hills, and watching the changes of the sky.<sup>11</sup>

And he continues in this vein for a number of paragraphs, before noting, 'I must have had the reputation of rather a solitary fellow.'<sup>12</sup> Or again, the figure of his guardian, Tom Bennett, fares much better in *My Argument with the Gestapo* where he acknowledges his great debt to him, saying that if he made a list of the things he learned from him it 'would be very long' and that 'only from my father did I learn what would make a longer list.'<sup>13</sup> His attitude to the Bennetts here is more in line with a letter he wrote to Iris Bennett in 1966 where he spoke of 'the immense debt I owed to Tom and which, all appearances to the contrary, I have never forgotten. And the debt I owe you.'<sup>14</sup> The picture he paints of Cambridge too is much less dark than in his autobiography, describing the beauty of spring in his final months, writing 'I had always known Cambridge would look like this in the spring. It was very beautiful; everywhere was very beautiful in the spring' adding, very mildly when compared to his dislike of Cambridge in his autobiography, 'I still couldn't be sure I liked it.'<sup>15</sup>

As Merton leaves England in *The Labyrinth*, another of his early novels, he finds it heartrending to leave 'all the places I have ever most liked, the places I have grown up in' and writes of 'places where I have been most happy' saying 'leaving it behind is like leaving behind my

whole life'<sup>16</sup> – such sentiments for England cannot be found in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. However, over time they begin to resurface, most noticeably in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* where he can write: 'I for one mean to preserve all the Europe that is in me as long as I live.'<sup>17</sup> Then in *Conjectures*, after a reference to how essential to a genuine life it is to 'experience all the times and moods of one good place',<sup>18</sup> Merton makes a long series of reflections on the influence upon him of places he visited during his years in Europe, beginning with Paris, through which he passed many times on his travels. He could say of Paris, as the city in which his parents first met, 'I came into this world because of Paris.'<sup>19</sup> Merton's surroundings and the books he is reading cause him to 'find the place full, once again, of French angels' recalling various places he visited in France saying: 'It is important to me that I have walked the dusty road under the plane trees from St. Antonin to Caylus and from Caylus to Puylagarde' and he concludes this section on France with the statement: 'There are times when I am mortally homesick for the South of France, where I was born.' He immediately moves on to recall 'English angels also' remembering various places he visited in England, even speaking of 'angels of Cambridge the backs of Clare and Kings ... the bell in the tower of St John's, striking by night, heard in my digs in Bridge Street.'<sup>20</sup> This reference truly marks the extent of the change in Merton's feelings towards Europe, especially England, as he had previously nothing good to say about Cambridge and had regarded it, in his first fervor at Gethsemani, as the nadir of his period in hell.<sup>21</sup> Merton concludes these reflections with a phrase that clearly resonates with David Scott's on the 'culture God grew warm in' writing that 'all this was in some way sacramental.'<sup>22</sup>

The grace of Merton's later years, the vision and wisdom he shares so freely and abundantly with us, encouraging us in our relationships with the Divine, with our fellow human beings, and indeed, with all of creation, were sown in his youth through people, places, and books that were indeed sacramental for him – Saint-Antonin, Oakham, Rome,

even, he can say near the end of his life, Cambridge. They were all, what Gaston Bachelard whom Merton was reading in the late sixties, would term *demeures*, 'places,' like Merton's hermitage, 'where living takes place.' David Scott, in the aforementioned poem about Merton's time at Cambridge, reminds us of some of the similarities between the Merton of 71 Bridge Street and the Merton of Mt Olivet Hermitage – the undergraduate cartoons striking a 'chord with Chuang T'zu' – 'the camera, the books, the records,' all found in both places, reminding us once again of the consistency of the man and of just how formative those years in Europe were. But now, David concludes:

... The difference  
is that this has the icons,  
and the slow noise of a fire  
gently crackling to the internal jazz.

Although Thomas Merton would become an American citizen on 22 June 1951 his worldview would very much remain just that, a worldview. On the margins of American society he remained truly free to turn his prophetic vision, his prophetic voice, to whatever aspect of our world, and our life in that world, which he felt stirred to address – including the Catholic Church he had so readily embraced in 1941 and even his more recently adopted country. Merton's journal, *The Sign of Jonas*, where he records his naturalization as a US citizen, concludes with one of his most famous prose pieces, 'Fire Watch, July 4, 1952.' Whilst his now fellow Americans were celebrating their nationhood with vast displays of pyrotechnics Merton was, in stark contrast, patrolling the dark, sleeping monastery, his new country, with a single flashlight on the lookout for the least spark that could turn those tinderbox buildings into an inferno. From his place on the margins Merton felt free to critique his adopted country which, in its jingoism, appeared all too frequently to react to events with 'adolescent pain and truculence' in its newfound role on the world stage. Merton wrote that finding

themselves 'faced by the supercilious contempt of friends as well as the hatred of our avowed enemies,' Americans seemed innocently mystified, 'by what there is in us to hate' having 'considered ourselves and found ourselves quite decent, harmless and easygoing people who only ask to be left alone to make money and have a good time.'<sup>23</sup> From the Kentucky woods Merton could certainly not be accused of being unable to see the wood for the trees or, in words the theologian Martin Marty used about Merton in the late 60s, 'you were "telling it as it is" and maybe "as it will be"' adding, 'what bothers me now is the degree of accuracy in your predictions and prophecies in general.'<sup>24</sup>

So it is very fitting to have this volume of essays all from European authors commemorating and celebrating the centenary of Merton's birth 'on the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain.' Thomas Merton certainly became a citizen of the world, as he would write in an introduction to an Argentinian edition of his complete works:

In the silence of the countryside and the forest, in the cloistered solitude of my monastery, I have discovered the whole Western Hemisphere. Here I have been able, through the grace of God, to explore the New World, without traveling from city to city, without flying over the Andes or the Amazon, stopping one day here, two there, and then continuing on.<sup>25</sup>

But, though he was certainly a citizen of the whole world, Thomas Merton remained at heart a European.

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## Notes

1. David Scott, *Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p.125; reprinted below with 'Thomas Merton's Cambridge', *ibid.*, p.124.
2. Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003), p.466.
3. Christopher Willcox, Review of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*. *Wall Street Journal* (26 March 2003), D.8.
4. *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, ed. Robert A. Wild (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 2009), p.77.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953), p.320.
6. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p.63.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p.51.
8. Thomas Merton, *Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p.293.
9. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1960), p.11.
10. *ibid.*, p.62.
11. Thomas Merton, 'The Straits of Dover' [unpublished manuscript], Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, pp.7, 14–16.
12. *ibid.*, pp.15–16. This last phrase has been crossed out but is still legible.
13. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1975), pp.143–4.
14. *Road to Joy*, p.77.
15. Thomas Merton, 'The Labyrinth' (Unpublished manuscript), Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky. (Merton's original page-numbering is missing from many pages and so page numbers referred to will be those added at some later point but which run through the whole manuscript), p.75.
16. *ibid.*, pp.84–6.
17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), p.62.
18. *ibid.*, p.161.
19. *ibid.*, p.163.
20. *ibid.*, pp.166–8. Merton recalled many other memories of England and France in a letter of the early 1960s to Etta Gullick writing of Saint-Antonin: 'I don't think I ever liked a place so much, until the hermitage.' *The Hidden Ground of Love: The*

- Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p.345.
21. Though, even before *The Seven Storey Mountain* is published, Merton writes to Evelyn Waugh saying that he'd thought of rewriting his passages about Cambridge adding: 'I'm not as mad at Cambridge as that.' Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), p.4.
22. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.169.
23. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), p.18.
24. Martin Marty, 'To: Thomas Merton. Re: Your Prophecy.' *The National Catholic Reporter*, 3.43 (30 August 1967), p.6.
25. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (London: Fount, 1989), p.48.