An Interview with Walker Percy about Thomas Merton.

Conducted by Victor A. Kramer and Dewey Weiss Kramer in May 1983.
Edited by Paul M. Pearson

Question: What was your association with Thomas Merton?

Answer: Well, I met him only once and the connection was unusual. I had been asked to be on the advisory board of an obscure journal called *Katallagete*, which means in Greek "let us be reconciled." It was organized, edited, and published by two friends of mine, one being Will Campbell, a Baptist preacher, theologian, civil rights activist, and his friend Jim Holloway who was the editor. So, Will asked me to be on the board. He said he had all sorts of Protestants and blacks but he didn't have a Catholic. So I was his token Catholic, I guess, and he had Merton. I don't know why he needed me if he had Merton. I guess he needed a broken-down lay novice Catholic. I didn't mind doing that because being on the advisory board meant you didn't have to do anything -- I had no particular duties. I only went to one meeting and the only reason that I went to that was that Will called me and said that "We are going to meet at Gethsemani Abbey this year. We are going to meet at Merton's place." So that was a chance to meet Merton which turned out to be very fortunate because I think that was either the year or the year before he died, before he went to Thailand. So, we all converged on Gethsemani. I think I flew up to Louisville and was met by somebody, maybe Will, and we drove to the Abbey. We drove up the hillside to Merton's little cinder-block cottage about a half-a-mile or so from the Abbey.

Question: So you went directly to the Hermitage?

Answer: We went directly to the Hermitage. I'd been curious about what the connection was between Merton and the Abbey and the Abbot -- you heard the strangest things about Merton. One that he was schizophrenic, and another was that he had left the Church or he had broken his vows or he was living with a couple of women and all sorts of things. I was amazed at the number of intellectu-

als who admired Merton and who could not tolerate the idea that he could be an observant Trappist monk for twenty years. But I wanted to see for myself what he was like. I think I corresponded with him several times. I think he wrote me about *The Moviegoer*. He had read *The Moviegoer*, and he was interested in *The Moviegoer*. But I just remember finding ourselves sitting on the front porch of this rather rude, but pleasant, cinder-block cottage overlooking a little swale, a little meadow. And Merton surprised me. He was much more robust than I expected. Now that I look back on Furlong's book, she talks about him being sick all the time. You would think after reading the book that he was an invalid. He was always complaining about this or that, usually a gastrointestinal thing. But, maybe, it was true. But he looked like he was very husky. He was dressed in jeans and I have a recollection of something like a Marine skivy-shirt, and a wide belt. And as I say very, very healthy looking and a pretty tough-looking guy. Very open, outgoing, nice and hospitable. And he fixed everybody a drink, he poured me a nice bourbon and water. Well we were right in bourbon country, you know. In fact driving from Louisville, I remember seeing all these huge places where they stored the liquor.

Question: Can you describe Merton's face? Can you remember?

Answer: He had a ruddy complexion and a healthy, unlined, not a particularly distinguished face; I mean, if you met him in a crowd, or on the street you wouldn't pick him out as being extraordinary looking. I think maybe thinning hair. But, a sturdy, outgoing, well-met fellow.

Question: Had you read many of his books?

Answer: I had read most of them. Not his poetry particularly, I don't read much poetry. I don't have a gift for it. But I'd read most of his prose works.

Question: And so when you were there at that meeting did you talk about the magazine mostly? Or did you have a chance to talk about other things?

Answer: Well, I don't remember. It was very casual. There was a lot of bantering, kidding around, you know, not very serious talk. I remember I was left alone with him for maybe a half hour. And I was a little uneasy, you know, about what to do, and I think he was uneasy with me. What do two writers say to each other?

What do you say to Thomas Merton? There were a lot of things that I wanted to ask him. I remember thinking what to call him. So I called him Fr. Louis. He didn't say otherwise. I would have wanted to ask him things like: "What's going on here? I mean, what's your relationship with the Abbot?" Maybe I should have, maybe he would have answered. Well, obviously, I didn't do it. So we made polite conversation.

We had had a meal. We had gone down to the refectory with the other monks. We ate there; it was good, it was very nice and the monks were very nice. And we went back up the hill, but I don't remember Merton being with us when we ate with the monks. I don't remember whether he came down there or not.

But I remember asking him what he thought of the future of the monastic movement in this country. I wasn't particularly, really interested in that; I wanted to ask him about himself but, I mean, I didn't. Oh incidentally, he had a camera. Griffin had been up there right before then. In fact, there were photographs by Griffin of Merton—big, big, almost poster size—showing Merton just as I saw him in his jeans, that's exactly how I saw him, the way Griffin photographed him. Griffin had just been there, we just missed him was my impression. And Griffin had gotten him interested in photography. He was taking pictures. I remember him, we looked across the meadow and there were deer right at the foot of the meadow. So I asked him something about the future of monasticism in the U. S. It's amazing how little we found to talk about, how much I wanted to ask him, but didn't feel free to ask him. He said something about, "Well he didn't think that the big monastery or the big abbey was a thing of the future." He thought that there were going to be small communities, maybe in cities. He talked about a few men living in a house, you know, somewhere maybe in Louisville or something . It was a rather standard reply which a lot of people were thinking in terms of in 1967. There were maybe half a dozen of us, one was a black guy from Atlanta, and I've forgotten his name. He would have been on the Board of *Katallagete*, a black activist. (VAK: Julius Lester?) I think that's who it was.

Question: Would you like to say something about the magazine?

Answer: *Katallagete* was a very remarkable magazine, it went quite a ways back and mainly reflects the thinking of Will Campbell

and Jim Holloway. But it was one of the earlier expressions of ecumenism in a particular sense, Will Campbell being a drop-out from the National Council of Churches. He disagreed with the social orientation of the National Council of Churches very much believing in Christian orthodoxy or rather Anabaptist anarchy. And yet at the same time with a very strong feeling for, maybe the main orientation, was racial reconciliation. In the early sixties, this was not as commonplace as it is today. I'm impressed by early issues having articles by Jacques Ellul. Ellul was an admirer of *Katallagete*. And Merton, Ellul, and other people. I don't think the magazine ever had a circulation of over a thousand or so. It was chronically broke and you never knew when it was coming out. But it was unique of its kind.

Question: You said that you had read several of Merton's books, do any of those books stick out in your mind?

Answer: Well, *Seven Storey Mountain* meant a great deal to me. It was about the time it came out that I became a Catholic so it had a good deal of influence on me. We were coming from the same place —shall I call it Columbia University agnosticism? I was interested in the fact of Merton's own reaction to it, I think he came to dislike the book himself. Life is never as simple as you think it's going to be, and I think he came to regard his monastic vocation, his first idea of it, much more romantically than in fact it turned out. *The Seven Storey Mountain* was a very compelling and attractive book and it came at just the right time both for me and maybe for my generation—postwar, a postwar feeling of uprootedness and dislocation. I had powerful reasons for connecting with it like, I guess, many people did. His background was quite similar to mine. We had both been to Columbia and I knew people that he had known. So I was fascinated with his idea of just leaving Columbia and striking out for the wilds of Kentucky.

Question: Were you surprised when he first wrote to you to say that he'd read *The Moviegoer*?

Answer: Yes, I was astonished, because I had heard from him and Flannery O'Connor about the same time. And I was much flattered, and I wrote him back. I think we corresponded a half a dozen times.

Question: I think maybe one of those letters of his indicates he sent one of those abstract drawings of his to you?

Answer: I've got them somewhere. I didn't understand them, I didn't know what he was trying to do.

Question: Some of those were printed in a book called *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Do you remember that book?

Answer: No.

Comment: It's a book of essays and it has a prose elegy in it for Flannery O'Connor.

Answer: I wonder if he corresponded to any degree with Flannery?

Comment: There's no record of it.

Answer: Really? You would think that he would have. Come to think of it, I don't remember any correspondence from her in her collected correspondence. I don't recall anything about Merton.

Comment: She mentions him a couple of times but she really wasn't excited about what she read. If you go through the index, his name is there a couple of times but she didn't spend much time with Merton.

Answer: She was on good terms with the monks at Conyers, wasn't she? Didn't she go over there?

Question: Oh, yes. Then also, because of the Robert Giroux connection, she was very aware of what Merton was doing. And you may know, Sally Fitzgerald wrote a little piece which was given up at Columbia University where she compares Merton and O'Connor. Have you read that?

Answer: No.

Comment: She talks about O'Connor and Merton as having similar temperaments and living a monastic life and being disciplined and so on. When I met Bob Giroux I talked with him about Merton and he made some of the same connections. Mr. Giroux said that when he would go to see O'Connor she would ask questions about Merton and the same thing when he would go see Merton, more questions would be raised about O' Connor. So, he was kind of the intermediary.

Question: Were you already Catholic or were you thinking about Catholicism before you had read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, or did it just help you find your way as a Catholic?

Answer: I think it did. I don't exactly remember the timing. I think my wife and I both became Catholics in 1948. So it I read it with great enthusiasm and much interest.

Question: You mentioned Columbia and your being a student at Columbia during the same time Merton was. Would you want to say a little bit about Columbia and New York City at that time?

Answer: I was in medical school which was up at 168th Street and he was down at Columbia College. He knew people like Giroux, and his friend, Robert Lax, and Mark Van Doren, and I knew none of those. I had not the slightest interest in English or English departments or writing. I was a medical student at P & S. [Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons]

Question: So you had no suspicion at that point that you would become a writer?

Answer: Not the faintest. In the interval I had interned at Bellevue Hospital, had done all the autopsies on tuberculosis patients and had contracted T.B. Not a bad case, but enough. In those days you went to a sanatorium. So I was out of it for a couple of years and I read a good deal.

Question: You know when Merton finally decided to go to Gethsemani he was so relieved to leave New York City. What do you think it was about New York City that he found was so oppressive?

Answer: I don't know. I think he must have mentioned that. He had a political period there. He was very funny talking about his first novel, I think he said he wrote a novel, he said it was a very pessimistic and ominous novel, from a left wing point of view, about Nazi bombers flying over the waterfronts of Hoboken or something. Sounded like a very bad novel. And he said it was. I think he got tired of the standard secular liberal orthodoxy around Columbia University. He was on his own spiritual quest.

Question: Do you have any ideas about why Merton became such a popular writer?

Answer: It had to do more with his talent. He was a very skillful writer and a very appealing writer and a very prolific writer. And also, in the late forties and fifties there was a tremendous spiritual awakening or hunger in this country and in the postwar generation. A friend of mine, Father Charles, had been a friend of Merton's and he had read the book and he had been a tail-gunner on a B-24 that got shot-up on the Ploesti raid. I think there were a whole generation of people who had been through the war and been through that experience. Imagine going from being a tail-gunner to a Trappist monk in Conyers. It wasn't a unique experience.

He was interested in Eastern monasticism which is one of the reasons he went to Thailand. And, I wanted to ask him more about that and didn't. It's a shame. I don't know whether it's an American trait, or a trait of writers but they don't really like to talk to each other much. But I had the feeling that if I could have spent the weekend with him or maybe had six drinks or something I think I would have been able to say a lot more and ask him a lot more. But there was a sense of a great deal left unsaid and a great deal that I would have liked to ask him about.

Something else, I was always curious about and wanted to ask about, and didn't feel like it—how did it work for him, for the abbots to ask him to write, produce these books? When you go to the bookstore at Conyers or the bookstore at Gethsemani and there is a big display, it looks like a Doubleday display of Merton's works. I've often wondered how he felt about that. On the one hand, he liked to write. Maybe it wasn't a bad idea. Writers often need somebody to tell them to go ahead and write. Like Dickens wrote under duress, you know.

Comment: I think Merton realized that. I mean on the one hand, he would say that he would prefer not to write. And on the other, and there are records of this, he knew full well that he profited by being told to go ahead.

Answer: Yes. I had that feeling that it might not have altogether been a bad deal. The popular idea is "poor Merton" having to crank out all this stuff just to help the Trappists. But I'm sure it wasn't that simple.

Comment: No, I think he enjoyed it, I really do. And I think he found that he could, through the writing, find what the next step

would be.And he learned more and more to be very disciplined. I talked with Fr. Flavian, the man who was his abbot in the last year of his life, and he said that Merton was so disciplined that finally he could just stop doing one thing, maybe counseling as Novice Master, stop talking, go to his room, sit down, and just turn on the valve and write. He would write for a half hour and then he would stop. And that takes a lot of discipline.

Answer: It takes a lot. And something, not all of us do either. Some of it sounds like that. Although I'm not a critic of poetry, it doesn't strike me much of his poetry is really first rate.

Comment: Part of the problem there is that the *Collected Poems* is such a fat volume. He never would have republished all that stuff.

Answer: One thing that surprised me about Merton was that I made a retreat at a Jesuit Retreat House near New Orleans and they have a room with different tapes. I noticed that they had a series of tapes of Merton's—"Talks to the Novices." He was Novice Master. They are really impressive, he really had a gift for that.

Comment: In fact he spoke to the Community on Sunday afternoons and they started taping so that the lay brothers could hear it also. And they did it for about five years. They've got, well, over two hundred tapes. He would speak to the Community about all kinds of subjects and there are some interesting talks there about literary theory.

Answer: What was admirable about it was the spontaneity, I mean, and the humor. It's funny. I would think he would have been an excellent Novice Master.

It was hard in my own mind to square this impression of him talking in this way to the novices with the portrait that Furlong paints of a rather tortured soul.

Comment: I think that's true. I think that she didn't talk to enough people. We had a man named Jim Finley come to Atlanta and speak at a conference we did on Thomas Merton, and he was a novice of Merton's. Finley told the nicest story. He said when he had gone to Gethsemani, he was a young novice of seventeen and he was supposed to go in and talk with Fr. Louis. He said he went in several times and he was just so nervous he didn't know what

to say, he just felt he wasn't getting anywhere with the spiritual direction. About the fourth time he went in Merton realized that this young man was very, very nervous. So Merton asked, "What's your job here at Gethsemani?" He said, "Well, Fr. Louis, I'm in charge of feeding the pigs." So Merton started laughing and Jim Finley started laughing, and Merton said, "Now look, from here on when you come here for your weekly conference, I want you to tell me something very specific about the pigs, tell me something that happened with the pigs that week." Jim had to go back the next week and he said, "Well, I was feeding the pigs and this one big pig, kind of, pushed this little pig over…" and they both started laughing, and then they laughed a lot. Jim Finley said that was exactly what he needed, and then Merton was his Novice Master for the rest of the time, and it was a real success.

Answer: I'm just remembering the only thing that I recall him saying about the Abbey. It was a rather hostile remark about the Trappist Monastery. He was talking about non-violence, he was very strong on non-violence, and he was saying how the Trappists, even the Trappists, violated this principle. And either I, or somebody, said, "Well, what do you mean? How do they do that?" He said, "Well, look at the way they exploit these brothers, these monks…." I remember the expression was "They got to break their ass carrying all this cheese around." I said, "I didn't really buy that, I didn't really think that was doing violence to people carrying cheese around."

He didn't like that, he thought that was a form of commercial exploitation.

Comment: I was speaking with a monk, Fr. Phillip, a Holy Cross Brother for twenty-five years before he became a monk, and he was a novice of Merton. We were talking about this very subject of cheese. And Fr. Phillip said, "You know we really have a problem here because if some of the younger monks actually knew how much money was being made, they might leave." And he kind of laughed. And so it is a problem, it really is. Although the monastery is very aware of their responsibility and so on.

Answer: Do they need the money to be self-sustaining, I wonder?

Comment: Well they give their excess money away. And in fact, at Gethsemani they employ people from that neighborhood on full-time and a part-time basis. And I think the younger monks are pretty aware of their responsibilities within the community so I don't think it's really a problem. I don't think anybody's getting rich.

Answer: Maybe I ought to say that I went there with some curiosity about the relationship between him and his hermitage and the Abbey. And I came away with the feeling that there was no disaffection, that they were on good terms. I mean maybe I expected to find him grousing in the woods and putting down Gethsemani Abbey. But, the only unfavorable thing he said was the crack about cheese.