

Wearing Our Mitres to Bed: Thomas Merton and the Need for Humor in “This Mad Place”

Paul M. Pearson

“Holiness is usually accompanied by a wonderful sense of humor.”
Attributed to Thomas Merton

After entering the Abbey of Gethsemani in December 1941, the most austere form of monastic life available to him at that time, Thomas Merton gave the impression that his career as a writer was over. Yet, as we are all too aware over fifty years since his death, that was not to be the case. Even in some of Merton’s earliest writing at the monastery, his humor, a key expression of our humanity, cannot be subdued. *The Seven Storey Mountain* certainly contains many passages that reviewers in the United States found humorous – describing Merton’s wit in various ways: “engaging,” “sure-fire,” “vigorous,” “high-spirited,” “warm,” “thoroughly American.” In contrast, British reviewers were not so generous, with the English Benedictine Aelred Graham describing him as “intense, one-sided, humorless, propagandist, morally indignant.”¹

Merton’s Pre-Monastic Humor

Before exploring Merton’s humor in his years at Gethsemani I want to remind the reader briefly of some examples of wit and wisdom in his pre-monastic years. One really needs to begin with his artistic parents and his avant-garde upbringing. Descriptions of Ruth Merton reflect a *joy d’vivre*, a lively and vivacious character, evident in her love of dancing and her delight in her baby son made apparent in the baby book she kept of his first years for the paternal grandparents in New Zealand.²

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, even through some difficult years, Merton can, with rare humility, turn his laughter on himself as he views his early life in sober, but good-humored retrospection, recalling joyful times. Most readers are likely to be familiar with passages where Merton’s humor shines through in his autobiography. Certainly his description of

1. Aelred Graham, OSB, “Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse,” *Atlantic Monthly* 191.1 (1953) 71.

2. Ruth Merton, *Tom’s Book: To Granny With Tom’s Best Love 1916*, edited by Sheila Milton (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2005).

the school chaplain at Oakham, comes to mind, and Merton's equating his use of "gentlemanliness" with the biblical definition of charity, in parody of chapter 13 of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.³ Or again, during his time in boarding school at Oakham, when cartoons, poems and prose pieces published in the school magazine, *The Oakhamian*, provide examples of his humor. For example:

Lines to a Crafty Septuagenarian

If in our socks we find a tear,
We quickly have it mended.
We hear that G. H. doesn't care,
And his idea is splendid:
He puts boot polish on his heels
And thus the aperture conceals.⁴

Upon Merton's return to the United States, after the death of his father and his disastrous year at Cambridge University, his initial companion is one of his father's "artistic crowd," the painter, illustrator and cartoonist Reginald Marsh. Marsh certainly influenced the young Merton, encouraging his interest in drawing cartoons, many of which would, like Marsh's own work, include social or political commentary. And Marsh, along with James Thurber and others, also influenced Merton's style of cartoons. Reginald Marsh also assisted Merton in his attempts to place his cartoons with prospective publishers.⁵ Merton's serious interest in drawing cartoons can be noted as late as February 1938, just months before his reception into the Catholic Church, when completing his "Declaration of Intention" for the U.S. Department of Labor, Merton described his occupation as a "cartoonist and writer."⁶

Issues of the *Columbia Jester* from this period clearly show Merton's skill as a cartoonist and as a writer of humorous prose and poetry. In Merton's *Jester* cartoons we can also see the development of his social voice, with his use of cartoons to critique the world of his time. For example a

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 73-74; subsequent references will be cited as "*SSM*" parenthetically in the text.

4. Thomas Merton, "Lines to a Crafty Septuagenarian," *The Oakhamian* XLVII (Easter Term 1932) 24.

5. At Yale University, Marsh's cartoons were published in *The Yale Record*, just as Merton's would be published in *The Columbia Jester*, and he was also a prolific contributor to *The New Yorker* and *New Masses* from 1925 to 1944.

6. Thomas Merton's "Declaration of Intention" (4 February 1938); archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky.

cartoon from 1938⁷ [Fig. 1], which satirizes the American attitude to the rising Nazi peril: “Don’t leave him alone or he’ll kick hell out of the cat”; or, in another example [Fig. 2], a cartoon where two “ladies” are discussing the Mann Act,⁸ commenting that it is “unconstitutional; it interferes with the pursuit of happiness.”⁹



“Don’t leave him alone or he’ll kick hell out of the cat.”

Fig. 1



“Of course the Mann Act is unconstitutional; it interferes with the pursuit of happiness.”

Fig. 2

Monastic Humor

St. Benedict, in his *Rule* for monks, is very specific in his directives about laughter in the monastery. In chapter six, he writes: “As for buffoonery, idle words or such as move to laughter, we utterly condemn and exclude them in all places nor do we allow a disciple to open his mouth to give them utterance.”¹⁰ Then in chapter 7, he refers to laughter again in his

7. Thomas Merton, “Cartoon,” *The Columbia Jester* XL.4 (December 1938) 7.

8. A law that made it illegal to “transport any woman or girl” across state lines “for any immoral purpose.”

9. Thomas Merton, “Cartoon,” *The Columbia Jester* XXXVIII.9 (Omnibus 1937) 14.

10. *The Holy Rule of Our Most Holy Father Benedict*, translated by a Priest of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1942) 57; subsequent references will be cited as “*Rule*” parenthetically in the text.

tenth and eleventh degrees of humility, instructing the monks “not to be easily moved and prompt to laughter, for it is written: ‘The fool lifteth up his voice in laughter’ (Eccles. 21:23)”; and that “when a monk speaks, he do so gently and without laughter, humbly, gravely and with few and reasonable words, and that he be not boisterous in his speech” (*Rule 75*).

Stories depicting monasteries in the popular imagination certainly give the impression that this part of the rule was followed to the letter. Frequently, Armand de Rancé, reforming abbot of the monastery of La Trappe, from which the Trappists get their name, is pictured with a skull in front of him on his desk, a gruesome reminder of the often-repeated phrase *memento mori* – “remember that you will die.” Merton himself writes of the “grim smile of satisfaction that Trappist corpses have” (*SSM* 387), and like de Rancé, Merton’s abbot, James Fox, for many years kept a skull on his desk.¹¹

However, commenting on these passages of *The Rule of St. Benedict* about laughter, Abbot Philip Lawrence, OSB writes: “Benedict’s . . . chapter on Lent indicates that he was aware that laughter and jesting were part of normal life. Laughter and jest are realities that also can build up or destroy.”¹² Another commentator, Dwight Longenecker, tells us: “Benedict is not against laughter and joy. He is against the kind of laughter that is linked with foolishness and sin. If you have ever known a truly joyful person you will know that their laughter rings with a truth and freedom not known in other forms of laughter.”¹³

Many readers of Thomas Merton, familiar with monks and monasteries, know well that monasteries are frequently joyful places. In an oral history interview Merton’s editor and publisher James Laughlin recalled his own experience of visiting Merton at Gethsemani in the 1940s for the first time:

This was a very novel experience for me, going into a monastery which, if I followed the precepts of my mother, I would have considered practically a place of the devil. It wasn’t at all, it was a wonderful place. It was full of fun and good feeling. I had expected in Merton

11. That is, until he had a visit from the actress Loretta Young and her two boys, who took the skull and chased each other around Fox’s office with it, making the teeth snap. After that, according to one of his secretaries, Dom James put the skull in a drawer, never to be seen again. This story was recounted to Roger Lipsey by Brother Patrick Hart, who had served as one of Fox’s secretaries.

12. Available at: <https://christdesert.org/prayer/rule-of-st-benedict/chapter-6-restraint-of-speech>.

13. Available at: <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2012/09/fr-longenecker-st-benedict-for-beginners-tenth-step-to-humility>.

to meet a somber-faced monk who strode silently through the cloister and into the church muttering prayers under his breath. It wasn't like that at all! From the moment I first came to the monastery gate and was greeted by a very jolly brother gate-keeper I saw that I had been completely misinformed about monasteries; this was a very happy place and Tom Merton was very happy . . . he had a wonderful gaiety about himself and about life.¹⁴

Stories abound that tend to confirm the impression James Laughlin had of monastic life prior to that visit, especially of the Trappist order.

Humor in the Monastery – The Witness of Others

Father Matthew Kelty, who had been one of Merton's novices, would often refer to Merton's humor in his talks and writings about him. A number of times when I was present for such talks he would look, quite pointedly, in my direction as he said: "His humor, I thought, was British. He could be very cutting . . . maybe even sarcastic. I don't want to put this out as being critical, but the British (Anglo-Saxons) are pretty good at the 'put-down,' but with 'class.' He could seem very British. His humor was on the dry side."¹⁵

One of my favorite examples of Merton's "dry" sense of humor was told to me by an ex-monk, formerly Brother Pius. One day in the Gethsemani bookstore a visitor asked Merton if Father Raymond Flanagan was still alive. Merton's immediate reply to the unsuspecting visitor was "No, he's dead from the neck up."¹⁶ Flanagan was already a well-published, more traditional author at Gethsemani when Merton joined the community; there was certainly some rivalry between them and many of their views were quite disparate. However, that being said, their correspondence is permeated by humor and it shows both men's use of humor to lighten a relationship that, in other circumstances, could have become problematic. For example, in January 1949 Fr. Raymond was in hospital at St. Joseph's Infirmary in Louisville for surgery for colon cancer and Merton would send him, under the pen name Poet Louseate, a series of humorous limericks to cheer him up, such as:

14. Transcription of Paul Wilkes interview with James Laughlin, 18 March 1983 [TMC].

15. Matthew Kelty, OCSO, "Looking Back to Merton: Memories and Impressions: An Interview," conducted by Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988) 57; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/1/Kelty55-76.pdf> (subsequent references will be cited as "Kelty" parenthetically in the text).

16. Story personally recounted to Paul Pearson by Chuck Pfeiffer, formerly Brother Pius.

The life of a nurse at St Joe's
Is easy, as nursing life goes.
But now that they're nursing
A crazy Cistercian
How long they can last no one knows.¹⁷

As the psalmist writes: "How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity" (Ps. 133:1).

Much of the community business at the monastery, when the rule of silence was followed to the letter, was frequently undertaken by short notes between the monks, and frequently these were more than tinged with humor. On one note from Merton to his abbot, arranging for a clerical suit for a visit to town, the abbot jokingly adds a note to Brother Irenaeus, the monastery tailor, to charge Merton: "OK – loan of a suit [\$5 dollars per day!!!]." ¹⁸ Or again, a note from Merton to Brother Irenaeus about a problem with his trousers: "Dear Brother. The zipper on these work pants does not stay closed. Thanks! In Jesus. F. M. Louis."¹⁹

Flavian Burns, one of Merton's students and later his last abbot, described Merton as "a boyish type" who had a "twinkle in his eyes. . . a very lively person, and to me very humorous, funny."²⁰ Burns described Gethsemani in these years as a very "serious place" where "most of the monks keep their eyes down [and] don't let on what's going on." But not Merton, Burns continues: "He'd let on. He'd comment on everything, if it was only by eye movements, a surprised look, something like that" (Burns 74). Another monk, Brother Columban Weber, recalls that Merton "would often poke fun at various things we did around the monastery in

17. Thomas Merton, "Five Limericks for Father Raymond," *The Merton Seasonal* 23.2 (Summer 1998) 11-12; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Seasonal/23/23-2Merton.pdf>.

18. Undated note from Thomas Merton to James Fox [TMC].

19. Undated note from Thomas Merton to Brother Irenaeus [TMC].

20. Flavian Burns, OCSO, "Merton's Contribution as Teacher, Writer and Community Member: An Interview with Flavian Burns, OCSO," conducted by Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 73-74; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/3/Burns71-89.pdf> (subsequent references will be cited as "Burns" parenthetically in the text). Mother Myriam Dardenne also makes reference to Merton's eyes. Finding him "very shy" at their first meeting, she noted, however, "such blue, clear, bashful, twinkling, humorous, piercing, deeply beautiful eyes" (Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, "A Journey into Wholeness": An Interview about Thomas Merton with Myriam Dardenne at Redwoods Monastery," conducted by Christine M. Bochen with Victor A. Kramer and edited by Christine M. Bochen, *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 39-40; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/14/Dardenne33-55.pdf> [subsequent references will be cited as "Dardenne" parenthetically in the text]).

a way that we could see the wisdom of it.”²¹

Monks joining the community, unsure of which monk was Merton, the most famous monk in America, if not the world, frequently have recounted that the real Merton would in fact be nearly their last choice as, from what they’d read, they didn’t expect him to be so joyful, but much more pious and serious. Again, Flavian Burns recalled, “it would be humorous seeing people try to figure out who is the famous author. They’d never pick him” (Burns 73).²² Recounting just such an experience, James Conner recalls learning that Merton

was the very vivacious monk on the other side of the chapter room who seemed to love to make signed comments in a very jovial and jokey way about things that the abbot was saying Merton came across as . . . very human, very down-to-earth He wasn’t signing anything derogatory or putting the abbot down, it was just his joking ways.²³

Long before I ever met any monks from Gethsemani, or met other friends who knew Merton, I can remember being forcefully struck by the story included in Michael Mott’s official biography of Jim Forest’s first visit to the monastery to meet Merton. Forest and a fellow Catholic Worker, Bob Kaye, had spent three exhausting days hitchhiking to the monastery. Kaye went to his guest room while Forest went to the church to offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their safe arrival. Forest recalls:

21. Gloria Kitto Lewis, “Learning to Live: Merton’s Students Remember His Teaching,” *The Merton Annual* 8 (1995) 93; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/08/Lewis88-104.pdf> (subsequent references will be cited as “Lewis” parenthetically in the text). In a story recalled by Matthew Kelty, Merton was less receptive to the humor of his students. When they were studying the Beguines one student, in seeming innocence asked “When did these Beguines begin?” Merton, Kelty recalls, didn’t think it was funny, adding: “that was typical of him. If he didn’t initiate the joke, if he wasn’t in charge of the thing, it would rattle him a little” (Lewis 94). This humor is clearly evident in Merton’s novitiate classes and, when he spoke at the Redwoods in 1968, Myriam Dardenne said “the laughter [was] so loud that sometimes you can’t hear the words” (Dardenne 48).

22. John Eudes Bamberger makes the same point in “Merton’s Vocation as Monastic and Writer: An Interview with John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO,” conducted by Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 4 (1991) 22; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/4/Bamberger21-38.pdf> (subsequent references will be cited as “Bamberger” parenthetically in the text).

23. James Conner, OCSO, “‘A Dedication to Prayer and a Dedication to Humanity’: An Interview about Thomas Merton with James Conner, OCSO,” conducted and edited by Paul M. Pearson, *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010) 214; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/23/Pearson212-239.pdf>.

the church's silence was broken by distant laughter, laughter so intense and pervasive that I couldn't fail to be drawn to it, such an unlikely sound for a solemn Trappist abbey. It was coming from . . . Bob's room: a kind of monsoon of joy. . . . coming mainly from a monk on the floor in his black and white robes, feet in the air, a bright red face, hands clutching the belly. A shade more than Robin Hood's well-fed Friar Tuck than I imagined any fast-chastened Trappist could be. Thomas Merton, author of so many books about such serious subjects, laughing half to death on the floor.²⁴

The occasion for the laughter, Forest tells us, was the smell from Kaye's socks after three days on the road!

In his private journals Merton frequently records things that amuse him; for example, he writes about "laughing [himself] silly behind the forage boxes" as he reads Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*.²⁵ Though, in accord with *The Rule of St. Benedict*, only a certain amount of laughter is proper, and he describes one novice whom the abbot has dissuaded from leaving standing "with a piteous expression in the novitiate library reading 'Relax and Live'" and notes, "Sooner or later they come to that."²⁶ In contrast, he records the departure of another novice, who "laughed more and more week after week until he finally laughed all day long," commenting in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, that "Life here is funnier than we think."²⁷ Or, as Merton suggests to his listeners in one of his final conferences from August 1968, "the real comedy is God's . . . the last judgment is going to be an epiphany . . . of just how funny it really was."²⁸

Another friend from this period, W. H. (Ping) Ferry, expecting to meet someone more austere, more solemn, describes how, from the outset of their friendship, there was "a great deal of laughter" – "he laughed boisterously when he laughed. And he laughed a lot. He was a connoisseur of laughs."²⁹

24. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 381.

25. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 163.

26. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 108; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.

27. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 173; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

28. Thomas Merton, "Aesthetic and Contemplative Experience – James Joyce," transcribed and edited by Paul M. Pearson, *The Merton Annual 27* (2014) 44; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/27/Pearson35-44.pdf>.

29. Wilbur Hugh Ferry, "'Action at the Center' An Interview with W. H. Ping Ferry,"

In an unpublished recording of Merton reading some sections of *The Geography of Lograire* into a tape recorder at his hermitage from October 1967, some of that laughter described by Ferry is captured on tape. There is a wonderful moment when Merton stumbles over his own lines and is unable to control his laughter:

Sweet Mother Rose and gypsy nun [laughter]
 Sweet Mother Rose and gypsy nun in a new trim toast collar
 I saw two wounds coming from a certain [laughter]
 I . . . [laughter]
 Sorry about the laughing. Bob Dylan did that one time and they kept it on the record. But I guess I better go back and start this over again. This is a part that I really like.³⁰

The Butt of Merton's Humor

The story recounted by Jim Forest of his first encounter with Merton leads me to consider some examples of the subjects of Merton's humor. That story points to an earthiness, a wholesomeness, about the human person that is the opposite of the carefully sterilized, sweet smelling, medicated, pre-packaged consumer that is so often presented to us by the media and by advertisers as our ideal. Merton himself makes fun of this in his later writings, especially in some of his anti-poetry, writing of how "every smell, every taste, every hissing breakfast food is endowed with the transcendental properties of being."³¹

Ron Seitz would also use the word "earthy" in describing Merton, adding that he "could joke about very serious things, but I don't think he was ever scandalous or blasphemous. He could just see the underbelly of many things." Seitz recalls that Merton loved *The Canterbury Tales*, including our human foibles and earthy references to the human body. He thought all that was, in Seitz's words, "quite holy and sacred. Everything is blessed and we shouldn't be evasive about that."³²

conducted by Gregory J. Ryan, *The Merton Annual* 4 (1991) 206; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/4/Ferry205-219.pdf>.

30. Thomas Merton, Recording #188-3a (15 October 1967) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/Laugh-Like-Dylan-188-3a.mp3>.

31. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980) 238.

32. Ron Seitz, "'The Climate of Humor and Freedom': An Interview about Thomas Merton with Ron Seitz," conducted by George A. Kilcourse, *The Merton Annual* 7 (1994) 137; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/07/Seitz129-155.pdf>. Seitz also suggests that *The Way of Chuang Tzu* was like a later autobiography because of "the self-effacement you find there," a "holy indifference," describing Merton as "extemporaneous," "spontaneous," "creative in the moment" and improvising all the time (154).

Hardly surprisingly, Merton also turns his wit on the world of politics, as well as many of the issues of his day that he is writing about. The target of this wit could fall anywhere on the political spectrum and, as with his cartoons in *The Jester*, could range from global issues right down to his own Nelson County as in this example from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*: “The democratic primaries are coming up. There is a man running for jailer who ought to know the job well. He has been in jail four times as a moonshiner. He is a ‘good Catholic’ too. Everything recommends him for the office” (CGB 125). As Herbert Mason, one of Merton’s correspondents, commented, Merton was a “social idealist” but his “humor helped curtail his enthusiasms”³³ – a humor much in need in our world today.

But many of the subjects of Merton’s humor are much closer to home. Frequently it is the eccentricities of the monastic life as lived at Gethsemani, with more than its fair share of eccentric monks, that conjure up Merton’s humor. So, for example, Merton records in *Conjectures* a dire theological conference which was concluded by the moderator declaring how good the conference was and that he “had hoped it would be longer,” and Merton writes, “In any normal gathering this statement would have been unpopular enough to merit boos and catcalls, if not a near riot. We just stood up and chanted the De Profundis. If you ask me, that was significant enough!” (CGB 126). Or again, when an elderly monk departs the refectory, banging the door in protest at the recording being played, Merton writes:

Pontiffs! Pontiffs! We are all pontiffs haranguing one another, brandishing our croziers at one another, dogmatizing, threatening anathemas! Recently in the breviary we had a saint who, at the point of death, removed his pontifical vestments and *got out of bed*. He died on the floor, which is only right: but one hardly has time to be edified by it – one is still musing over the fact that he had pontifical vestments on *in bed*.

Going on to ask the question we can all ask ourselves at times: “Let us examine our consciences . . . do we wear our mitres even to bed? I am afraid we sometimes do” (CGB 30).

Merton will also use his humor to critique the work ethos at the monastery, which he once compared to an armaments factory at time of war, giving this concrete example to his novices in May 1963:

33. Gordon Oyer, “Louis Massignon and the Seeds of Thomas Merton’s ‘Monastic Protest,’” *The Merton Annual* 26 (2013) 96; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/26/Oyer84-96.pdf>.

The thing you get when the first time a novice gets out cutting down a tree. I mean, he's going in all directions at once. He's giving out enough steam to drive three ocean liners around the world continuously for three years. [laughter] It's all going in all directions and very little of it is going into cutting down the tree. Why is this? Not because he's running away from anything, he's trying to prove himself. He's trying to show everybody that I'm a real rough and tough novice, I'm going to be a real Trappist. The fellow who really knows how to cut down a tree is not making an awful lot of fuss he's just cutting down a whole lot of trees.

I remember one time when we were novices, I mean when I first came over here in your day again. We were working back over at the foot of the Vineyard Knob, in the woods, and cutting over there. And we'd been cutting and not getting very far. And then all of a sudden Brother Clement got hold of some poor man who lived way back in the hollow back in New Haven. I went out there one day and this guy cut down more trees in one day than all the novices had cut down in about three weeks. He just knew how to do it. And he was getting paid by the tree. And he was real poor. [laughter] The next day he was out there with his wife and his wife was cutting down trees. [laughter] And the day after that Brother Clement fired him as he was cutting down too many trees. [laughter] So in other words, if a fellow is really serious about cutting down trees he just goes to it and cuts them down instead of doing this sort of a beaver act, cut all round the thing like sharpening a pencil [laughter] and then after that everyone just runs in all directions, and you pray, and you see which way it's going to go.³⁴

Or again, he will use humor in his conferences to illustrate a point he is making, such as the following example where he is unpacking the meaning of the phrase "giving God your heart":

Love consists in giving God our heart, but not just any old way of giving Him our heart, because the relationship is important. I mean, I give so and so my heart. You can write to a movie star "Dear Miss Taylor, I give you my heart." [laughter] You get a letter back "Miss Taylor thanks you for your heart." [laughter] Signed Joe Glutz, secretary. [laughter] You can go round giving people your heart, it's really easy to give people your heart when it doesn't mean anything.³⁵

34. Thomas Merton, Recording #55-4 (19 May 1963) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/Work-055-4.mp3>.

35. Thomas Merton, Recording #156-1(19 September 1965) [TMC]; available at:

And sometimes, he'll just tell the novices a simple, straightforward, old-fashioned joke:

How do you get six elephants into a Volkswagen?
 Three in the front seat, three in the back seat. [laughter]
 [Student: Is that a koan?] [laughter]
 No, that's just one of these useless jokes. There are a lot of elephant jokes going around now apparently. Where did I get it from? Brother Albert, he's got the elephant jokes over there, I'll have to get some more elephant jokes. Okay, this is useless, but there may be a reason for saying something like this once in a while.³⁶

As one would expect, Merton also turns his humor on himself, referring to his own peccadillos: poking fun at his own fame, calling himself the “one, original cloistered genius, the tonsured wonder of the Western world”;³⁷ laughing at his inability to stop writing, suggesting that he might “continue writing on my deathbed, and even take some asbestos paper with [him] in order to go on writing in purgatory” (*ES* 365); commenting on his relations to his abbot, James Fox, writing that “Poverty is a cinch. Chastity is harder but manageable. Obedience is a bugger!”;³⁸ or joking about his relationship to the world, as in his essay “Is the World a Problem?” where he rebuffs the image of “the world-denying contemplative – the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse” and instead asserts: “I love beer, and, by that very fact, the world.”³⁹

Readers of Merton's autobiography and journals cannot help but to be aware of his endless health issues and these too do not escape his humor. Writing back to his students at Gethsemani from the hospital in Bardstown during a stay in November 1957, Merton gives a humorous, though earthy account, of his treatment for hemorrhoids: “I had a spinal

<http://merton.org/Research/AV/Heart-156-1.mp3>.

36. Thomas Merton, Recording #110-3 (18 March 1964) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/Elephant-Joke-110-3.mp3>.

37. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 64; subsequent references will be cited as “*ES*” parenthetically in the text.

38. Thomas Merton, *Letters from Tom: A Selection of Letters from Father Thomas Merton, Monk of Gethsemani, to W. H. Ferry, 1961-1968*, ed. W. H. Ferry (Scarsdale, NY: Fort Hill Press, 1984) 8.

39. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 143-44.

and was aware of what the doctor was doing. He started out by saying ‘This will be real simple.’ Then after about 45 minutes he said, ‘Well, I’m going to have to do a lot more than I expected.’ He kept going deeper and deeper. I thought he would come out the other side’; but still managing to joke: “So the doctor and dentist have been keeping me in stitches. Ha! Ha!”⁴⁰ Then, just the next day, he writes back to them again saying:

They have rushed upon me from all sides, singing their abominable hill-billy anthems, wrenching my teeth from my head and at the same time submitting my person to every indignity in order to remove, as they jestingly asserted, piles. Nay, rather they have made off with an entire bowel.

From bitter experience I will send this message to any man who has piles. To such a one I will say: “Brother, keep your piles, and with them your honor!”⁴¹

A few years later, in March 1966, as Merton prepares to enter the hospital in Louisville for back surgery, he writes to his Columbia classmate Robert Lax describing his current health issues in humorous terms:

The back is in a crick. The neck has refused. The vertebra has crumped. The spine has diverged. The Head has rolled off. The neck has divided into three. The column hath a stylite sitting on top. I have developed an extra head. Thus I am off to the hospital to have the neck removed. I will return with eyes in the back of the neck.⁴²

Finally, Merton brings this same humor to some of the reflections he would share with the community about his permanent move to the hermitage in the summer of 1965:

In other words you have this regular rule. If the monster gets me or something like that. [laughter] You should see the awful mugwamps we have up there, [laughter] twenty feet high. The Loch Ness monster comes all the way from Loch Ness just to be ornery around here. I tell you, it’s terrible. So anyway that’s what we’ll plan. Brother Roger, Father Roger, is very disappointed that we are not having a procession up to the hermitage, [laughter] with a cross bearer, with

40. Unpublished letter of Thomas Merton to his novices (21 November 1957) [TMC].

41. Unpublished letter of Thomas Merton to his novices (22 November 1957) [TMC].

42. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 326; subsequent references will be cited as “*WPSHV*” parenthetically in the text.

acolytes, and with a thurifer and deacon, and sub-deacon, and holy water, and Reverend Father and the canopy, [laughter] the Blessed Sacrament, and the nuns of Loretto. [laughter] I mean, we could really make something out of this, [laughter] people just don't love me, I mean. [laughter]⁴³

And then, a couple of weeks later, on September 12, 1965, he talks to his listeners about his early days as a fulltime hermit:

What have I done to deserve this? People putting jocular notes about the hermit life here. Are the ravens feeding you? [laughter] And so forth. Well, if you want to know the news of the hermitage it can be summed up in three words, snakes in the jakes. [laughter] Dash to the jakes in the middle of the night and there he is, curled up digesting a rat. [laughter] Great life. [laughter]⁴⁴

Humor in Merton's Poetry, Correspondence and Art

Merton's prose writing and conferences have been the source for many of the quotations that I have been using to illustrate Merton's humor. However, I turn now to illustrate briefly some examples of humor found in his poetry, correspondence and art.

Scattered throughout Merton's poetic corpus there are a number of humorous poems that were pulled together into one section in Merton's *Collected Poems*. Probably the most famous is Merton's poem making fun of the mechanization that had taken place at Gethsemani, in particular the cheese business. The humor of this poem begins with the very title, "A Christmas Card for Brother Cellarer," subtitled "Chee\$e" – with the dollar sign substituted by Merton for the letter "s" of "Cheese":

I think that we should never freeze
Such lively assets as our cheese

and he concludes the poem:

Poems are nought but warmed-up breeze,
Dollars are made by Trappist Cheese.⁴⁵

43. Thomas Merton, Recording #154-3 (20 August 1965) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/Mugwamps-and-Procession-154-3.mp3>.

44. Thomas Merton, Recording #155-2 (12 September 1965) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/Snakes-in-the-Jakes-155-2.mp3>.

45. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 799-800; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.

But, again, it is not just the monastery or the modern world that comes in for ribbing by Merton in his humorous poetry. In the following poem, written inside Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* on the half-title page, Merton himself is the subject as he sought to entertain the children of his friend Tommie O'Callaghan whom he was visiting in Louisville while awaiting a ride back to the abbey:

Old Uncle Tom
 He lives in the woods,
 Pining away
 Without adequate foods

He is all alone
 And unconfirmed
 Thin as a bone
 And living on bacon.

Old Uncle Tom
 Thinking and thinking
 Lives in the woods
 Occasionally drinking

But when I recall the truth to mind
 I figure he's drinking
 All the time.

Poor old Uncle Tom.⁴⁶

Within the monastery, without access to more regular means of communication, Merton's correspondence became for him a major lifeline to the world. A major source of humor in the letters would be Merton's correspondence with his pre-monastic friends, most notably Ad Reinhardt and the much more extensive correspondence with Robert Lax. Their "inventiveness with wacky names, fractured syntax and wildly extravagant, at times semi-coherent language" was, no doubt, a "delightfully welcome form of release from routine for both men."⁴⁷ I've already quoted from his letters to Robert Lax in talking about Merton's health and so one other example will have to suffice to give a flavor of some of the exten-

46. Thomas Merton, "Old Uncle Tom," *Kentucky Poetry Review* 28.1 (Spring 1992) 92.

47. Patrick F. O'Connell, [review of] "Biddle, Arthur W. (ed.), *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*," *The Merton Annual* 14 (2001) 247; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/14/OConnellRevMertonLax244-251.pdf>.

sive humor in them. In 1968 a small extension was added to Merton's hermitage to provide a small chapel and an indoor toilet. Writing to Lax he describes it thus: "Ho ho was just here the builder from Barswops for building on the additions to the hutch. Ho ho showers additions and chapels and clusters and towers and verandahs and palazzos . . . missile silos in the sink, frigidaire in the rump, bar mit pingspong under the bed. Takes planning to make a hutch" (*WPSHV* 381).

Although, by no means as extensive, with only twenty letters surviving, a similar humor pervades Merton's correspondence with Ad Reinhardt. In response to an offer from Reinhardt of a small painting Merton replies:

Do I want a small painting? You inquire if I want a small painting. What you wish to know: do I desire a small painting.

Do I desire a small painting? Well, it is clear at least to me that I desire a small painting since I am in point of fact crazy mad for a small painting. They have to keep me chained to the wall day and night and a gag in my mouth because I roar continuously that I am dying for lack of a small painting.

Merton continues in this vein before moving on to suggest to Reinhardt how the small painting will be received upon its arrival at the monastery with "a week of sabbaths or a sabbath of weeks. The small painting will be honored by deacons and acolytes. The small painting will be taken in procession from the larvas to the basilicas. . . . As the hart thirsteth for the waterbrooks I thirst for the small painting."⁴⁸

In the sixties Ad Reinhardt would also become the recipient of some of Merton's calligraphies. The first calligraphy he sent was lauded by Reinhardt, though he went on to criticize it as "too small." To which, Merton replies: "I am again your friendly old calligrapher always small calligraphies down here, I am the grandfather of the small calligraphy because I don't have a big brush and because I no longer run about the temple barefoot in frosts" (Lipsey 286-87). Taking note of Reinhardt's comments about his calligraphies Merton also sent a new calligraphy to Reinhardt entitled: "slightly larger calligraphy." [Fig. 3]

But there is humor scattered throughout the correspondence frequently, for example, in his letters to young people, and I'm thinking here in particular of Suzanne Butorovich and John Harris's son, Arthur. While Merton corresponded with John Harris, his intermediary to Boris Pasternak, he also

48. Roger Lipsey, "Do I Want a Small Painting? The Correspondence of Thomas Merton and Ad Reinhardt: An Introduction and Commentary." *The Merton Annual* 18 (2005) 272, 274; available at: <http://merton.org/ITMS/Annual/18/Lipsey260-314.pdf> [accessed 6 August 2020]; subsequent references will be cited as "Lipsey" parenthetically in the text.

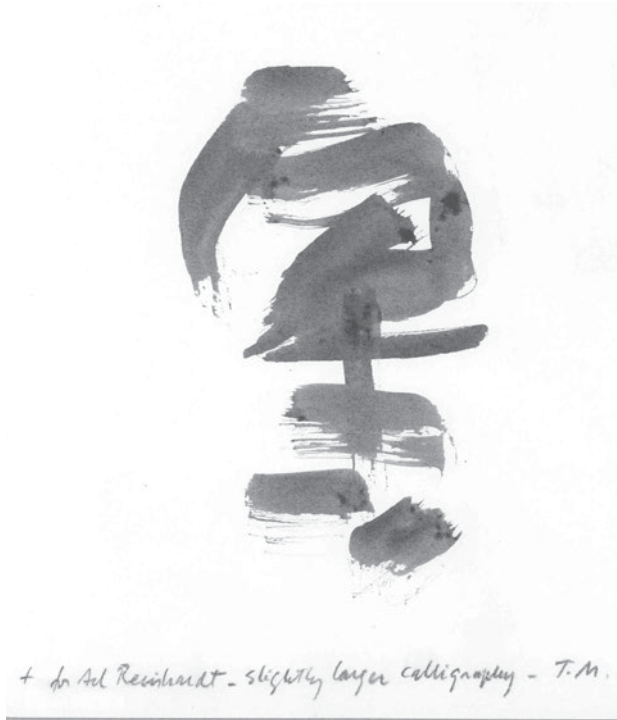


Fig. 3

carried on a “clandestine” correspondence with Harris’s twelve-year-old son. Addressing each other under the guise of spies, with Merton’s codename based on his monastery laundry number, he writes a warning to Arthur:

Dear Agent

A dangerous man to be watched is a certain Duke William, so-called “conqueror.” Blow him up if he gets near Hastings. He may give you some trouble.

Yours for an independent Cornwall.

A 127.⁴⁹

Humor in Merton’s Photography

Merton’s humor is also evident in his photography. In taking up John Howard Griffin’s offer of the loan of a camera Merton begins his description of the kind of camera he would need saying: “Obviously I am not covering

49. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 354; subsequent references will be cited as “*RJ*” parenthetically in the text.

the Kentucky Derby etc. But I do like a chance at fast funny out of the way stuff too” (RJ 140). Scattered through his photographs there are numerous examples of images that obviously met this description. For example, his brethren fooling around as they finished a bottle of communion wine on the morning of his departure for Asia [Fig. 4]; a fishing boat in Alaska bearing his name, “Tommy Boy” [Fig. 5]; and probably, one of the better known



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

images of this kind, taken in the vicinity of the monastery, and titled by Merton as “The Only Known Photograph of God” [Fig. 6].

In a journal entry in 1959 Merton would describe himself as “camera shy” and is critical of what he calls the “awful instantaneous snapshot of pose, of falsity, eternalized” (*TTW* 180). However, that shyness doesn’t seem evident in some of the photographs of him from the 1960s where he seems happy to pose or to play to the camera. Performing for the camera with a variety of visitors: his literary agent Naomi Burton Stone; a Salvatorian brother, John Lyons; or Robert Lax – a photograph [Fig. 7] Merton would tape in his journal and compose a humorous verse to accompany it:

The old monk is turned loose
 And can travel!
 He’s out to see the world.
 What progress in the last thirty years!

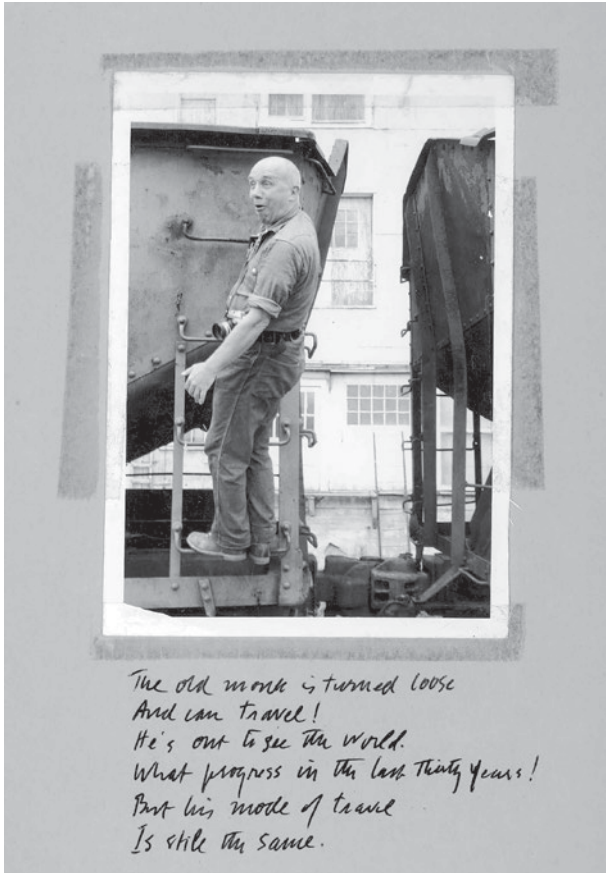


Fig. 7

But his mode of travel
Is still the same. (*CP* 815)

With other photographs he would be sent by visitors Merton would sometime write humorous captions to accompany them. On one photograph of him standing in front of the main wing of the monastery he would write:



Fig. 8

“How’d you like to buy this joint,” or, on another standing in front of the monastery and staring up at the sky, “Will it drop the bomb?” [Fig. 8].

Conclusion

This has been a bit of a “Cook’s Tour” of some examples of humor on Merton’s “Road to Joy.” So, what are we to make of this jovial monk? It becomes clear from Merton’s life and work, and especially in many of the oral history interviews with people who knew him, that though he may have laughed a lot, it was humor St. Benedict would have approved of, not sarcasm or ridicule at the expense of others. Frequently Merton’s uses his irreverence in his conferences and correspondence to temper truth, to point out the falseness of whatever “sacred cows” he perceives – from the larger world, down through the Christian church, to the cloistered

community at Gethsemani, and never failing to include “the tonsured wonder of the Western world.”

We too, as Merton suggests, need to be able to stop brandishing our croziers and wearing our mitres in bed and instead, like Merton, be able to laugh at our idiosyncrasies and those of our world remembering, as Harvey Cox suggests, that “laughter is hope’s last weapon” and that “where laughter and hope have disappeared man has ceased to be man.”⁵⁰ John Eudes Bamberger speaks of this ability in Merton recounting one incident in particular:

Towards the end of his life . . . he was having considerable difficulties with his health . . . and was actually going through a good bit of anguish, and he was talking to me with considerable feelings of his difficulties, and all of a sudden he began to laugh. I knew he was feeling very badly, but he was able to see the funny side of it and how he himself was partly the cause of his difficulties. Before long he had himself laughing and that’s very unusual. I’ve never seen anyone do that. (Bamberger 31-32)

But I want to leave the final word to Merton himself as he records, with some humor, a biographical statement to be published with one of his poems:

Might as well read this *curriculum vitae* which was written to go with that Dahlberg poem in the *festschrift*. Since this is a mixed-up tape anyway, may as well put every piece of junk on it. Born in 1915 in Southern France a few miles from Catalonia, so that I imagine myself by birth Catalan and am accepted as such in Barcelona where I have never been. Exiled, therefore, from Catalonia, I came to New York, then went to Bermuda, then back to France, then to school at Montauban, then to school at Oakham in England, to Clare College, Cambridge, where my scholarship was taken away after a year of riotous living, to Columbia University, New York, where I earned two degrees of Dullness and wrote a master’s thesis on Blake. Taught English among Franciscan football players at St. Bonaventure University, and then became a Trappist monk at Gethsemani, Kentucky in 1941. First published book of poems: 1944. Autobiography (1948) created a general hallucination followed by too many pious books. Back to poetry in the Fifties and Sixties. Gradual backing away from the monastic institution until I now live alone in the woods not claiming to be anything except, of course, a Catalan. But a Catalan in exile

50. Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) 157.

who would not return to Barcelona under any circumstances, never having been there. Recently published *Raids on the Unspeakable, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Mystics and Zen Masters*. Have translated work of poets like Vallejo, Alberti, Hernandez, Nicanor Parra, etc. Proud of facial resemblance to Picasso and/or Jean Genet or alternately Henry Miller (though not so much Miller).⁵¹

51. Thomas Merton, Recording #214-9 (20 May 1967) [TMC]; available at: <http://merton.org/Research/AV/CV-214-9.mp3>.