

ACTION AT THE CENTER

An Interview with

W. H. ("Ping") Ferry

Conducted & edited by Gregory J. Ryan

Assisted by Elizabeth H. Ryan

Ryan: Please tell us how you first came in contact with Thomas Merton.

Ferry: Sometime in mid-1961 I had a letter from Tom. I knew something about him, as everyone in America did, but I had never been in touch with him. I had a letter from him saying that he'd like to "get into the action" at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions* [at Santa Barbara, California]. He had been reading our periodicals, our papers, which had been sent to him, I believe, by [James] Laughlin of New Directions. He said all of these subjects interested him a great deal and he liked the way the "conversation" was going. So, although he couldn't leave Gethsemani, he didn't mind writing letters. And he read a lot, and so on. Of course we welcomed this intervention by him greatly. To have Tom Merton's contribution to the discussion at that time, at least from my point of view, was not only timely, but almost a gift from heaven. That's because we were in the midst of a very large debate about the merits of the Hydrogen Bomb which had just appeared to make the world a much worse place to live in. And we had some religious potentates out there. Father John Courtney Murray was present to hold up his side of the "Just War" theory. And I believe Reinhold Niebuhr was there at the same time with his wife. Rabbi Gordis from the Jewish Theological Seminary was on hand. And a large discussion was going on at that time. But *for me*, knowing something about Merton's views, this was a very great thing to have happen.

* This interview took place on 2 August 1989 at the Ferry home in Scarsdale, New York. The complete transcript is on file at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

Ryan: So, after your first contact by letter, when did you visit him?

Ferry: I think the first trip was within a year [April 1962]. It had never occurred to me to go there. I didn't think he welcomed visitors. I didn't know the ways of monasteries very much. Anyway, I was busy and not traveling around a great deal myself. But he wrote at some point saying that, "Maybe you could stop in here some day and we could have a talk. We've got so much on our joint agenda that it would be nice to have a talk." Well, that was great. And so I went to see him. I've forgotten the date. But it was the first of about seven or eight visits, I guess. And then he came to stay with us just before he left for the Orient on his last trip. And that was to be the longest time I spent with him. My first wife and I spent eight or nine days with him on a tour of northern California. He was looking for a site for a hermitage to return to when he got back from the Orient.

Ryan: Now, before your first visit, had you seen pictures of him? No? So, when you did visit him, what would you say of his appearance? Did he "look like a monk?"

Ferry: Not a great deal. I thought I'd meet somebody more austere. Somebody more solemn. Somebody who didn't ask — even before we met — I said, "Shall I bring anything?" and he said, "Yes, how about some beer?" Funny, but somehow I hadn't associated beer and monks. But that was our first meeting and I was awed, of course. I was in the presence of a singular human being. I was aware of that. But, right from the outset we were good friends and there was a great deal of laughter. This is something that is not noted very much in these solemn essays about Tom, but he laughed boisterously when he laughed. And he laughed a lot. He was a connoisseur of laughs in a way.

Ryan: When you visited him at the Abbey, did you visit indoors or outdoors?

Ferry: Outdoors, almost always. See, we walked a good deal. He didn't have the hermitage until much later — five years later. And I always rented a car when I came down from Louisville. So for the first visit I came in the front door, of course, but from then on I met him at the gate on Bardstown Road and we'd rendezvous there and go off by ourselves. (**Ryan:** And he was dressed in work clothes?) Yes, usually. Seldom in his habit.

Ryan: When you met with him, did you just meet with Merton or were there others there, too?

Ferry: Just him.

Ryan: You mentioned his laughing. Did he also reveal to you a serious side?

Ferry: Oh sure! We had a lot to talk about. This was just at the time when the censors [of the Order] were slamming the door on him saying, "No more about war and peace from you, Father Merton. We've had quite enough of that stuff." So we had some business to do. I was in possession of, or I had the use of, a nice, red-hot xerox machine and plenty of mailing facilities. And he was writing about the things that were at the center of my own interests: the conduct of the Vietnam war, the use of these weapons, and so on. So it became a sort of *samizdat* arrangement. I was his director of *samizdat* for a couple of years.

Ryan: Did he reassure you that publishing in mimeograph the way he did or sending you materials to be sent out was within the limits set for him by his Order?

Ferry: Yes, he was — as I've put down elsewhere — he was obedient. He found it very hard, but that was part of its value to him. He said to me, "Poverty's a cinch. Chastity's a little harder, but you get used to it. But the vow of obedience, that's a bugger. That's the hardest deal of all." No, he would not . . . He looked into this matter carefully because it was news. It was in the papers that he wasn't going to write about war and weapons any more. So he had to find other ways of getting materials out. And never was it to be used with his byline or . . . but they were background and, sooner or later, they all appeared, as they're appearing even now. He was patient. He wasn't very patient. He was as patient as he was required to be. But he was bubbling with this stuff: the weapons, the war [in Vietnam], the race situation. I was able to go there more often than others and I was of some considerable use to him.

Ryan: When he sent you things to be sent out, did he provide you with the names of people he would like them to be sent to, or would they go just to people to whom you normally sent materials?

Ferry: Well, it was a joint mailing list. Of course, I always sent it out to the dozen or so people of his, but my mailing list was much bigger than that. I suppose that it was around seventy-five or eighty people. Something like that. I didn't really keep any record of it.

Ryan: Somewhere he mentioned that he had heard that "his 'stuff' was being quoted by people," but that he never got word of it. Can you say something about the effect that his writing did have on the people who were receiving it from you?

Ferry: It's hard for me to answer that because the people I sent these to tended to be academics; they tended to be intellectuals; they tended to be "engaged," and so on. I don't recall that anyone said, "Thank you for sending this. It has absolutely changed my mind." On the other hand, I was very aware that Tom had an enormous effect on all kinds of people. And that's what he wanted. He wanted to *have* an effect. There was never any evangelism in him. He wasn't trying to persuade people to be religious or to become Roman Catholics or anything of the kind. I never heard a single advocacy of that kind coming from him in all those days and hours together. But this mailing list kept growing. I had to stop it after a bit. I just could not in conscience — I couldn't use all those facilities in good conscience. I was paying for some of it, but not all of it. So I stopped it off at around seventy-five or eighty. And in all I suppose I made about six mailings — five or six mailings. I've been asked to give these figures and I'm not sure. I didn't keep a diary in those times.

Ryan: You've mentioned that he sent you his writings on politics and technology, but didn't he also send you literary work?

Ferry: I think he sent me everything. No, not everything. He sent me none of the stuff he wrote on the lives of the Fathers — all that religious stuff. He never even mentioned it to me. I was surprised that there was so much — that there were so many things that he never even mentioned to me. And much of it was written after 1961. He was busy with these things. Nobody, really *nobody*, had any idea of how prolific this man was. J. Laughlin, who knew as much about Merton as anybody, as his publisher, as his friend — J. was out there more than anybody — he was staggered when, after Tom died, he went down to look for the literary remains, to find two or three beer cases full of manuscripts. [Ryan: Interesting packaging!] Yes, interest-

ing packaging. And J. hadn't any idea either. I suppose the person who knew more about Tom's literary output than anybody was Naomi Burton Stone.

Ryan: Did you know Merton was an artist? When you were with him did you see him work at all? (**Ferry:** No.) Only from what he sent you?

Ferry: Just from what he sent me. Every once in a while he'd scribble something with a drawing along the side. And . . . I showed you those calligraphies out there in my office. Those are the remains of thirty or forty of those. He'd say, "Do you like these things?" He'd just reach down into one of those beer cases in the hermitage. And there were dozens of those calligraphies. He'd say, "Here, take them along. Take as many as you like." Silly old Ferry! I just took a handful. I had about thirty-five of them. I've given them all away. Anybody who came in and had a real interest I'd say, "Well, here's a gen-u-ine Merton." (**Ryan:** And you just have three or four left?) Yes.

Ryan: Did you know at the time that Merton was a photographer? Did he send you photographs, too?

Ferry: Oh, yes. Oh, sure. He always had a camera. That's what we did. He looked forward to these visits. After the first two or three times, he always had a camera with him. He always had places to go. He had barns or fences or trees or running water to photograph. I saw almost none of this until *Monks Pond* came out. I wasn't interested. I had no camera myself. John Howard Griffin was his coach in this.

Ryan: There's mention in the biography of your nickname, "Ping." And that you called Dom James Fox "Pong." Could you tell about that?

Ferry: Yes. That was a funny relationship because Dom James discouraged people from coming to see Tom, of course. And that was a good thing because there was always a line . . . (**Ryan:** Like a swinging door?) . . . A swinging door. Were you ever there in the olden days before they built this new visitors' lodge? (**Ryan:** No, I've only been there since then.) Well, you had to go in through the bookshop and so on. Very narrow gate. And there was always a rather gruff Brother in charge there. And I got that treatment, of course. But after the first meeting, Tom sent Dom James something that I

had written. He said, "I think this will interest you." And it did. It did interest the abbot a great deal. He disagreed with *all* of it, but it was interesting to him. And so the next time I went there I was asked to speak to the Chapter, I mean to give a shortened version of the paper. It pleased me very much. I did it. It was on technology and he [Dom James] was obsessed with technology. And he gave me a hundred dollars for it. I framed it and had it hanging up for a while but, since the check was made out to the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, I gave it to them.

Ryan: I want to ask you about the Retreat. The famous retreat on the "Roots of Protest." Can you tell us something about that?

Ferry: Only that it was a great event. A luminous event in my memory. And I don't remember so good. I don't remember anything so much as that it was held; that it was serious. Everybody was concerned about his own attitude toward the war [in Vietnam], what was going on toward the development of those new weapons and so on. Nobody's ever caught the flavor of the retreat. I've never written anything about it myself. Tom said he was going to write something about it and he did, but it wasn't anything significant. It was just notes in a diary. John Howard Yoder said he was going to write something, but if he did I never saw it. Phil Berrigan talked a good deal about it and, as a matter of fact, he mentioned it often. He and I made a series of joint appearances on the uses of technology. My side of the subject was its effect on jobs and his was on the spirit. He was still a Josephite priest at that time. But James Forest is the only one who has tried to put something together — and it's a pretty good account. I have a copy of it someplace. But I had not so much to do with anything except getting hold of some money for some people who came and didn't have any money to get to and from Bardstown. That was all. I was very glad to be there myself.

The first night, I guess, as we were breaking up, Tom took me aside and said, "Tomorrow, during Mass I want you to give the homily." "Oh, no! Not me," I said. "Ping, I want you to do it," he said. "A lot of this stuff is your idea . . ." and so on. Well, I made a *lot* of notes. I stayed up pretty late. Pretty late — about 11.00. That's *late* in those precincts since we were up at 5.00 a.m. I hadn't slept a great deal. I was nervous about this. And as we were going through this kind of tunnel, just before we got to the chapel, Tom said, "I can't. I can't let you do this homily. I know you probably worked on it. I've got to do it myself. If the Abbot ever heard that you had done the homily, there would just be hell to pay. I'd never hear the end of it." He said, "I'm

sorry, I shouldn't have done that." But it had kept me up all night. The reason for that, that the Abbot wouldn't have liked it I guess, is because I'm not Catholic. And as cordial as my relations with "Pong" were, this would not justify my appearance at a Mass and my giving the homily. Tom never explained it. I just accepted it.

Ryan: That "Ping/Pong" — was that just a joke between you and Merton or was the Abbot aware of it, too?

Ferry: The Abbot signed his letters to me as "Pong."

Ryan: Would you say something about the meetings that were held in New York and Geneva to discuss Pope John XXIII's encyclical "Pacem in Terris"? And about the hopes of having Merton attend and participate?

Ferry: I was the organizer of that first one in New York and it was a big affair. To us it was very necessary to do what we could to spread the word as far as we could about what the Pope had to say about nuclear war. Among all the potentates and moguls, I thought it would be just great to have Tom come and speak. I tried it out on him and he said, "You know, this is not quite what monks are supposed to do. And, I'm glad to have that excuse because I get a lot of invitations to different things." Which he did — quite a number of them. Then he said, "I don't think I can do it, but it's the *only* thing I would really *like* to do. But you'll have to work it out with Dom James. If I just go and ask, he'll say no. But he thinks a lot of you, and maybe you can 'con him into it.'" So I tried it out on Dom James and the answer was "No." I had a long letter from him — I thought I'd try it out by mail — and he explained why he couldn't do it and Tom, again being obedient, said, "He's my spiritual director and I guess he knows best." It was awful hard for him to say that. But he did send a paper and the paper was published in our papers about "Pacem in Terris." And later he contributed another paper to us in gratitude for his visit with us at the Center. I think we first published a piece called "The Sacred City" — a very, very nice piece.

Ryan: When you went to visit Merton did you let the Abbot know in advance that you were coming?

Ferry: I had to let Merton know and then he told the Abbot. I don't think he had to do that, I don't know. Because Tom was self-protective, too. He

had writing to do; his own assignments, his studies — self-assigned and from the authorities as well, things he regarded as rather treacly pieces. I never “happened in there,” no. He asked me only on two occasions — aside from the meeting, the so-called retreat — that he asked me to see if I could fix up one visitor for him. He wanted to meet Bob Dylan. I said, “No dice. I can’t do that. That’s going to run me into contacting an awful lot of agents, and so on that I don’t want to deal with.” And he said, “What about Joan Baez?” I said, “Well, she’s a friend of mine. I think I can arrange that.”

Ryan: How about that? That’s interesting. Did you visit Merton at the hermitage?

Ferry: Oh, sure. Indeed. That’s where we met. (**Ryan:** You would meet him at the back gate and he would take you up?) Yes. We carried a case of beer up there several times. (**Ryan:** I’m sure that’s not easy.) It’s not easy. (**Ryan:** A future “filing case.”) Oh, it’s between half-and-three-quarters of a mile to get up there. Sometimes he couldn’t be there. I’d just park the car and meet him up there. He was pretty good. He gave me times when he was pretty certain that he could get down to the gate.

Ryan: And when you met there, did you meet inside or outside?

Ferry: On the porch, in rocking chairs. At the recent International Thomas Merton Society meeting [May, 1989], I went up to the hermitage while you were at Mass. It was a nice day, you recall. I just sat in the rocking chair.

Ryan: How had it changed?

Ferry: Some of the trees are gone. And the hermitage is almost twice the size of what it was. It started as almost just a room. Then there was the chapel, and a kitchen, and a little outhouse — a shed. None of those things were there when I was there first.

Ryan: Apparently you shared liquid refreshments. Did you share any meals at the hermitage?

Ferry: Well, I brought grub. I brought hamburgers a couple of times. He liked hamburgers and beer.

Ryan: You had previously been meeting with him at the monastery. When you met with him at the hermitage, was there any difference in him? Did he seem more relaxed, more at peace?

Ferry: Oh, yes, decidedly. No question about it. I remarked on it. He said, "Certainly. This is where I belong." It wasn't that he was uncomfortable about anything or that there was any physical discomfort at the monastery itself. It was the surroundings, I think. Those woods and bushes and open spaces that he wrote poetry about were of vast importance to him.

Ryan: It's been said that there were those in the Peace Movement who thought that he would be more influential in getting the message across if he were outside the monastery. Were there people in your circle who thought that he would be more effective outside the monastery? Did you think he would be more effective outside the monastery?

Ferry: No, it was a great advantage to have him in the monastery writing this way. I never encouraged him to leave. (**Ryan:** Did he ever discuss with you that people thought he should get out?) Oh, sure. With that invitation to the "Pacem in Terris" thing, he said, "I get a lot of this stuff. A lot of people would like me to come outside. But I don't think I'd be nearly as effective. I don't know how effective I am, but I don't think my effectiveness would be enhanced by getting away from this place."

Ryan: You mentioned in your talk with Paul Wilke² [published in *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*] the urgent phone call you got from Merton to get down to Gethsemani as quickly as you could, and that you rarely got calls from Merton. Were there other times when he called you? What did he call you about?

Ferry: He only called me twice. That one time mentioned in the book: when he called about the nurse. The other time was not an emergency. It had to do with his schedule for coming to California. That was all. But the emergency call was about the nurse he fell in love with. I'm sorry that I missed the workshop at the First General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society that dealt with this topic because I had been somewhat involved, as you will see.

Tom called me up and said, "Could you come to see me? It's quite important." I was in Santa Barbara. So I said, "What's it about?" He said, "I

can't talk about it. But I'd like to see you sometime soon if you can get here." I said, "Tom, it's a little awkward." He said, "Well, whenever you can get here. Don't push it." I said, "I'll do it when I can. I think I can do it next week sometime." He said, "When you come, bring a pocketful of change, will you?" A pocketful of change? I thought to myself, "Why not some beer?"

So I went down and met him at the back gate and he was not in his habit. He was dressed in his work clothes and he said, "Come on. I've got something I've got to talk to you about. It's very important." And he told me about this nurse. He only identified her as his nurse. And he wanted to talk about what he should do. He said, "While we're talking, drive to get as far away as possible so we can talk." It was a very hot July day, if I'm not mistaken. He said, "I've got to get away from the monastery. I want to make a phone call. And I don't want to be where anybody will see me."

So we drove about twelve or fifteen miles away. There was a telephone kiosk a few yards from a gas station. Right out in this hot sun beating down like crazy. So he went in to call up his nurse. That's what all the change was for. He didn't name her. He said, "My nurse friend." I didn't know her name for a long while thereafter. But he couldn't reach her. The line was busy. It was really quite funny, but it wasn't funny to Tom at all. Here was this man who was swept by a real passion. He just *had* to talk to her. I said, "I know how you feel." Most men do. But I hadn't gotten the full measure of it until after we drove around and stopped at other phones, too.

In the meanwhile, he told me about her and he said he just couldn't see enough of her and he had to talk with her. I said, "What are you going to talk about?" And he said, "That's what I want to talk with you about. What would you think if I just disappeared from the monastery for a month or two? This nurse and I." I said, "You're not serious, Tom." He said, "I mean it. I'm very serious." And he wasn't smiling. There weren't any laughs for him in this conversation. I said, "Where would you go?" He said, "Oh, that hasn't been decided. We'd just disappear. Just like that. Just for a couple of months. Do you think anybody would pay any attention?"

I laughed. I said, "You *must* be kidding! Nobody would pay any attention? In the first place, how about your abbot?" He said, "Don't worry about the abbot. That's a separate question." I said, "Yes, I think a lot of people would pay attention. I can even see: '*Famous Monk Disappears with Irish Nurse*' on the front page of *The New York Times*." He said, "Oh, come on. This is a serious matter." I said, "I'm being serious!" He said, "Well, who would tell them? It would be secret." Of course, I was laughing,

but I could see this was a very important matter to him. He said, "Do you think I ought to do this?" I said, "I don't think you ought to ask questions like that of me or anyone else. It's personal." I went on, "I know how you feel. I'm a man. I have these sensations, too. But I don't think it's on. I just don't think it's on."

We talked about her a lot, too. He said she was very sensitive and sensible. And it turned out she was the one who "saved the day." That's my judgment. If she had said, "O. K. Let's go away" I think he might have done it. He might have gone off. But she certainly put her foot down. Then we went back to the monastery. I was just there for that afternoon, then I went back to Santa Barbara. He said, "When you get to Louisville, will you make a call for me?" I said, "I won't. I don't want to become complicitous in this. I don't want to do it. I think it's a bad idea." So that's the way it was left.

I thought I was in possession of a secret. He didn't say, "You're the only one who knows." But the way this thing was conducted I thought I *must* be the only one. And I didn't know that I was not the only one for quite a long while — until J. Laughlin stopped in here one day on his way up to his house in Norfolk, Connecticut. He said, "I understand Tom talked to you about the nurse." I was dumbfounded. I said, "You know about her?" "Oh," he said, "Sure. I was down there to talk with Tom about it." I learned [while I was just at the ITMS Meeting in Louisville] that he got the O'Callaghans into the picture and there were others he talked with as well. It was all over the place. I said to J., "That's going to be a difficult thing for any biographer to deal with." And he said, "Yes." Thereafter John Howard Griffin was commissioned to do the biography. And you know he wrote that section before he died [*Follow the Ecstasy*]. Yes. And it was passed around. And it was sent on to me: "Do you think this is true to what happened since you know something about this?" Apparently everybody had seen it. And I said, "Yes. I thought it was very delicately, very well handled by John Howard."

Tom never mentioned it again to me. I was there once or twice after that. I never raised the question and it never came up in letters. I learned that he had a talk with the abbot, who was anyway — I think — his confessor. Somebody had prevailed upon him to speak to the abbot. That was part of his vow really. I don't know who did that. I don't know any of that story: that's why I'm sorry to have missed that session.

Ryan: You talked about Merton's asking your advice about going away for a month or so. Whose idea was it for him possibly to work with you out at the Center in Santa Barbara?

Ferry: Well, I made a generalized offer that if he could take some time off that he could come out for a while, but it was like offers he had from other groups. It was no more than that because by the time I came to terms with him, so to speak, by that time it was clear to me that his proper place was "under orders" and that he felt better there although he chafed a good deal. Actually, he felt better and he often would say to me, "I suppose Dom James knows what he's doing. I suppose it *is* best for me to stay right here." Things like that. But he was so attractive, of course, that when he left [after his visit at the Center on his way to Asia], my colleagues all said, "Why don't you sign him up when he comes back and see if he can't stay? If he can go over to the Orient, why can't he come here and stay for a while?" But, of course, we never saw him again.

Ryan: Was it part of your conversation with him that afternoon at the telephone kiosk that you would speak with the abbot about his working with you out in California? Or was that an idea that came up later?

Ferry: Oh, no, that came up later. Did it ever get as far as asking the abbot about it? No. See, there were other things of a great deal more interest to Tom than that. You will recall that Ernesto Cardenal and Tom talked seriously about the two of them setting up a monastery off the coast of Nicaragua someplace. There's quite a lot of correspondence about that. I saw some of it. Tom didn't tell me all about it. He just let me know that it was on and then it was off. But I think he said that Dom James had taken the precaution of writing to Rome to make sure that any kind of venture like that would not be sanctioned. But that was very much on his mind at one point.

Ryan: Could you say something about what he was like when you met him at the airport in California before his departure for the Orient? Can you tell something about that scene? Was he dressed in traveling clothes? Did he wear a Roman collar?

Ferry: Traveling clothes. He did put on a collar — once, or did he? I told him, "You know, while you're here in Santa Barbara you'll have to let me bring in the folks so they can gaze on you." And he said, "Yeah. I know. I suppose that's right. But don't make a big announcement; just a few people." I said, "I'll keep it down as far as I can." I didn't tell him any names or a certain number. Word got around, of course, so instead of a dozen

people, there were thirty-five or forty in my living room in Santa Barbara. But he was glad to see them. He really was. He didn't get a chance to meet this kind of person. He didn't meet many people, as far as that goes. Now, all of a sudden there were farmers, people who had come down out of the valley, young and old. Good looking women and ancient men from the faculty. He liked them all.

I just remember him getting off the plane and him with that big wide-faced smile of his and looking up at the mountains and the sun with his arms outstretched: "Well, here I am at last!" But he had been out shortly before. He stopped in Arizona on the way over and New Mexico.

Ryan: In his letters to you he mentioned that while you were riding up the coast scouting out possible sites for a hermitage he might go off and meditate somewhere while you watched birds, or something. Was there any way of telling that you were with a monk? Did he keep his monastic observance in any way?

Ferry: Oh, yes. He said, "Let's stop here for half an hour while I read my Office." And he'd walk up and down the beach or out into the woods or whatever. When he came back there were never any questions. I was used to that. It was nothing new for me. But that's the only way. It changed a little when we got up to the Redwoods Monastery. There, all the "nunnies" fluttered around him. Oh, I was taken very much to task on that: saying they fluttered. Someone wrote to me. I had written something about that. Somebody else who had been at the monastery, a monk or somebody like that said, "They never fluttered when I was there." [Laughter.] I restrained myself from pointing out that there's a difference between him and Tom Merton.

Ryan: How about while you were riding? Did he strike up a conversation at all or was he fairly quiet?

Ferry: Oh, we had long periods when we were quiet. He was looking around and thinking. He had a good deal on his mind. And I didn't realize how much he had on his mind. I knew he was keeping a journal because he would say, "I've got to get down some notes." (**Ryan:** While the car was going along?) No, in the evening, mostly. And I knew he was writing a journal and it would probably turn out to be a book.

Ryan: One can only imagine what it must have been like for you to receive word of Merton's death. Somewhere there's mention that you didn't think it was such an "accidental" death. Or that you suspected that there might have been something else afoot.

Ferry: At first I thought it was a possibility. There wasn't much detail to be had. I talked to Brother Paf [Hart] several times in those frenzied hours after I got back from Mexico. See, all this had happened while I was away. (Ryan: When he went off to Asia, you went to Mexico?) No, I had gone down there for ten days or so. I just happened to be down there and I didn't get back till the twelfth, or whatever. And I learned about it in San Diego when I came across the border and phoned up my office to find out what had happened while I was away. I had been out on a ranch in Baja California with my wife. And this wire was read to me there. But I had all that time driving up from San Diego to Santa Barbara to try to figure out how this could have happened. And some of the monks were — although they're not a very suspicious lot — they were elaborating all sorts of ideas about how "Uncle Louie" could have been killed so efficiently.

Some informal investigation was done. I didn't have anything to do with it. And at last, maybe two, three, or four months after the event — long after his body was brought back — I think we all agreed that it was just bad luck. Just too bad that the direct current wire and the fan were where they were when he slipped on the terrazzo floor.

But there was a lot of speculation about it. He was known to be troublesome to the government. They passed dark hints around a bit. Cardinal Spellman, in effect, had said, "Who will rid me of this infernal monk?" That sort of thing. But I didn't take it very seriously. Not because I was brighter than anybody else, but if anybody had wanted to do away with him, there were far less spectacular venues in which this could take place — to be made to look ordinary, and so on. No doubt a good many people — in the Pentagon and elsewhere — were perfectly satisfied that they didn't have to take account of what he might say next — to say nothing of some of the chanceries of the Church, as far as that goes.

Ryan: It's interesting to look back in his writings to see that he was writing against Apartheid, germ warfare, weapons that annihilate people but leave property intact, Somoza, etc. — and this was so many years ago. Can you speculate on what you think would hold Merton's interest today? What would he be involved in today?

Ferry: I think he would be a big player in the environmental issues. I think he would become a sort of unofficial theologian of the environmental movement. I think he would take a very lively interest in the increasing dehumanization of society. These things that you and I were talking about: the control of technology, and so on. This interested him immensely. Not from the point of view of "Gee whiz!" But the point of view of where do people come in? How do you keep people in the picture when all these things are happening? That would be my guess. And the race business, of course. Those would be my guesses.

You must remember, as I said at the beginning of this, Greg, that I did not share the side of Tom that dealt with faith, and the concerns of his religion and his Order. These were very deep matters to him. Very deep and important to him. So when I say, "This is what I think he'd be talking about today," I'd guess that people on another side of him would come out with quite a different answer. What I'm saying is, this is where I hope he would be spending his time.

Ryan: I have no other questions. Is there anything that you can think of that you'd want to say that I haven't touched on?

Ferry: Only what I mentioned before that I think needs to be said about Tom's gaiety, his laughter, his sense of jollity, of good feeling. This doesn't come up, naturally, in most of the books that are written about him, but it certainly deserves a place in anything called a full portrait. I forget what Michael Motf [in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*] has to say about him. I don't recall that he paid much attention to this aspect of Tom's life. And Tom's good humor wasn't forced. It was right there in the middle of his life. He was a jester in many ways. He performed in the middle of the ring a lot of the time. At least in his dealings with me he did. Aside from that there's the fact that I never — because of my own disposition, and so forth — I never had much access to that other part of him: the faith part, the concern with belief, prayer, and so on. I'm sure I missed something. I'm sure I missed a great deal. But you can't have everything.