

THE MAN IN THE SYCAMORE TREE: A Fragment of an Early Novel

Thomas Merton

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EDITOR'S NOTE

One of Thomas Merton's early novels, My Argument with the Gestapo,¹ originally called Journal of My Escape from the Nazis, made its appearance only the year after Merton's death (1969). It was widely held that this was the only pre-monastic novel of Merton's that escaped the flames. In subsequent years, however, fragments and larger segments of some of these novels surfaced in unsuspected places. They were written between 1939 and 1941, and Merton specifically mentions writing novels at the cottage at Olean, New York, not far from St. Bonaventure's College (today a University) where Merton taught English for a year and a half before his entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941.

From The Seven Storey Mountain and other sources, including journals from this period, we know that Merton in the company of Bob Lax and Ed Rice and others from Columbia, spent several summers at the cottage which belonged to Lax's brother-in-law. There in the beautiful upstate New York countryside the young writers kept journals, wrote novels and poetry.

1. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

In an entry in his *St. Bonaventure journal*, Merton wrote on June 11, 1941: "Now I really have three novels going at once—The *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* which is already in the hands of Miss Burton, *England's Jewel*, at Curtis Brown, Ltd., *England's Helicon*. The second is what I write on the typewriter but not from *Escape from Nazis*, and the third is what goes in this longhand book." The *Man in the Sycamore Tree*, fragments of which were discovered in *St. Bonaventure's Archives* after Merton's death, was certainly one of these. Another which remains nearly intact as far as one can tell is *The Labyrinth*, and a very short section of the third, *The Straits of Dover*. There may have been others, and with perhaps other titles than the ones given here, but we know of at least four novels, parts of which have survived.

Naomi Burton Stone, in her introduction to *My Argument with the Gestapo*, refers to these novels as well: "Tom [Merton] actually brought me two novels, *The Labyrinth* and *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*. I wanted very much to sell them, but while young editors all seemed to share my enthusiasm, older and wiser (and perhaps later sadder?) heads always seemed to prevail. *The Labyrinth* was autobiographical, and Tom said of it in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: 'I found the writing of it easier and more amusing if I mixed up a lot of imaginary characters in my own story. It is a pleasant way to write. When the truth got dull, I could create a diversion with a silly man called Terence Metrotone....'"²

She reflected further on *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, a fragment of which we are pleased to publish in this volume of the *MERTON ANNUAL*: "It is my recollection that *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, which was a wild and wonderful story, often extremely funny, also had in it a strong autobiographical streak. Unfortunately it was presumably one of the three finished novels that he himself destroyed before entering the *Abbey of Gethsemani*."³

Fortunately, the opening part was preserved, thanks to a Monsignor Richard Fitzgerald, an alumnus of *St. Bonaventure's*, to whom Merton entrusted some of his writings as he was about to leave for the Trappists. Fitzgerald wrote to Father Irenaeus Herscher, the Librarian at *St. Bonaventure's*, on May 23, 1974, from Key West,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Florida: "Back in 1941, before he left *St. Bonaventure's* to join the Trappists, Thomas Merton gave me a copy of a journal of his writing and notes. It contains some original and annotated works, probably unpublished, as well as carbons of some of his journal entries and poems."⁴ He was offering this material to *St. Bonaventure's Library/Archives* if they were willing to receive it. They were, and among its treasures of some 200 pages, was discovered this fragment from *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*.

Merton commented on this novel in a journal entry on the 26th of June, 1941: "The novel I wrote last fall [1940], *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, came back from Curtis Brown. I am not so sore at it as I was a few weeks ago..."

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4. Letter of Richard Fitzgerald to Father Irenaeus Herscher, Archives, *St. Bonaventure's University*.