

# Hunting the Unicorn: Thomas Merton's New York

By Sheila Rosen

*"Do you know, I always thought unicorns were fabulous monsters . . . I never saw one alive before!" 'Well, now that we have seen each other,' said the unicorn, 'if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you.'"*

Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass*

We came from Canada, the United States, and Ireland – from Roman Catholic, Anglican, Nazarene, Lutheran, Baptist and no-church backgrounds, some twenty twenty-first-century pilgrims,



**The Cloisters**

Chaucerian in diversity and idiosyncrasy, set on exploring Thomas Merton's New York. Under the knowledgeable leadership of Don Grayston of Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia and Judith Hardcastle of the Canadian Thomas Merton Society, we spent a beautiful week in May, 2003 roaming the streets of Merton's first American home base. Our own geography (physical and theological) was background as we set the focus, turned the spotlight, on Merton's New York, Merton's "lady." Merton said New York "is feminine. It is she, the city. I am faithful to her! I have not ceased to love her . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Our first excursion was to "The Cloisters," a museum devoted to the art of medieval Europe. The Cuxa Cloister, part of which was brought from Merton's birthplace in France, was the tenuous connection to Merton.<sup>2</sup> Here at the Cloisters, the excellent guided tour of the famed *Unicorn Tapestries*, telling their many-layered story, offered a surprise, a metaphor for Merton's story. The unicorn is hunted and finally captured, then depicted in a lightly fenced garden which he could leave, but doesn't, for love of the fair maiden. This final tapestry of the seven is titled simply "unicorn in captivity." In medieval times this was a hunt story, a love story, and/or a spiritual story of the sacrificial love of Christ. It is still subject to many interpretations. For me on this pilgrimage, it was a picture of Merton, hunted and



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captured by God's love, a unicorn in voluntary captivity, the pointed spiraled horn representing his extraordinary antenna, receiving and sending, desiring to know God and make Him known.

Next stop: Douglaston, Long Island – by train from Penn Station. This was Merton's home



**Home of Merton's Grandparents,  
Douglaston, Queens**

while he lived with his grandparents. We were warmly welcomed to Zion Episcopal Church by Pastor Patrick Holtkamp and members of his congregation. It was here in this lovely light-filled church that Merton searched for the Divine – and did not find it. The church of that time was a product of the rationalist spirit of the age, and Merton had to go elsewhere to find light. The present rector is favorably disposed to Merton but the congregation has not always been so, feeling that he slighted them in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Pastor Holtkamp read us an unpublished letter Merton wrote to the daughter of the Zion Church pastor soon after publication of his autobiography, apologizing for any harm done by his remarks in the

book. In the letter were many *nevertheless*'s, and *however*'s as he sought to explain the validity of his opinions for that place and time. This made the letter sometimes very amusing but more than that, it was a moving revelation of a young man trying to learn honesty and kindness. He ended his letter by asking her to pray for him. The daughter has allowed the letter to stay at Zion Church as part of its Merton collection. Father Michael Callaghan, professor of theology at St. John's University, Jamaica, NY and Donald Grayston, our tour leader, also spoke to the group, further deepening our knowledge and adding to our experience of place, our sense of time travel. The birds, the flowers, the gravestones in the churchyard, the grandparents' house, and even the train ride back to Manhattan were much as Merton might have experienced them.

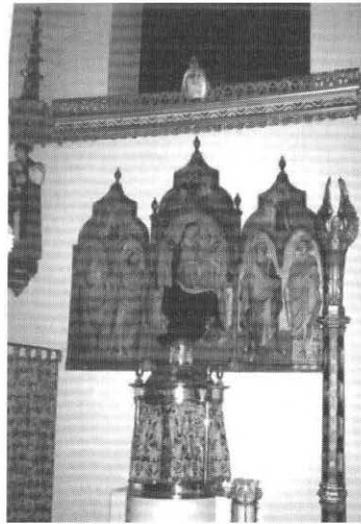
A few nights later, Father Daniel Berrigan, SJ, a lean, handsome 82-year-old, came to the House of the Redeemer (a former Vanderbilt mansion on the Upper East Side) where many of our group were lodged. He came to give a public lecture in the magnificent old library: "War, an Irrational Way to Peace." His lecture was serious and passionate, occasionally spiced with sardonic wit. This was the man I'd heard about in the 60s and 70s, protesting the Vietnam War, protesting nuclear arms, ending up in jail for his trouble, along with his brother Philip. My paramount impression was of strength – strength for the journey. He spoke of his love and admiration for Merton, and his sadness at his early death. Father Berrigan kindly signed books for us, including a first edition of *Time Without Number*, his prize-winning first book of poetry, discovered that very day in the Strand Book Store by one of our group. This brought a smile to his face and the comment, "This brings back memories . . . they probably charged you plenty for it." He's still writing books: a recent bible commentary on the book of Lamentations, relating it to current Middle East conflict; also a recent collection of poetry, *And the Rising Bread*. When someone asked, "What do you do these days?" he replied, "teach part-time, and try to live full-time." Daniel Berrigan, SJ, New Yorker, priest, poet, peacemaker, teacher, bible study leader, minister to persons with AIDS, a man living the radical love of Jesus, a friend of Merton and a gracious guest at House of the Redeemer.

Another day in New York, and we follow the trail of Merton around the campus of Columbia

University, then walk up Broadway to Corpus Christi Church. There, Father Raymond Rafferty led us to follow Merton's steps through the church where he first decided to follow Christ. The parlor by the door where Merton said to Father Ford, "I want to become a Catholic" (*SSM* 216); the altar of Our Lady where Father Moore received Merton's "abjuration of heresy and schism" (*SSM* 222); the baptismal font where Merton declared "credo" – I believe – where he then received the breath on his face, the salt on his tongue, the water poured over his head; the confessional where "species by species, as best I could, I tore out all those sins by their roots, like teeth" (*SSM* 224); then the altar where Merton knelt at the railing to receive his First Communion, where God "called out to me from His own immense depths" (*SSM* 225). As

a kind of seal on all we had been absorbing, we saw the name *Thomas Merton* in the church's baptismal registry.

It was a great gift to be taken by Father Rafferty step by step through Corpus Christi Church with such sensitivity and attention to detail, including his readings from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and Merton's poem "On the Anniversary of my Baptism." We later viewed manuscripts of Merton's writings when we had the privilege of visiting the Rare Books section of Butler Library at Columbia University. There was a special Merton exhibition of drawings, letters, and journals, including the original manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. We read aloud the actual first draft of the first page, typed by Merton with much crossing out etc. The opening paragraphs were later revised at the sugges-



**Lady Chapel,  
Corpus Christi Church**

tion of his editor, in order to zero in on the particular for a catchier opening. But I found his original passionate abstract opening to be a powerful theological statement. Just as moving to see was the original hand-written manuscript of Merton's "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943." This exhilarating day ended with a delightful concert by Brenda Fitch Fairaday, soprano, and Elizabeth Rodgers, piano, performing "The Hermit Sings," which included Merton's poetry set to music.

Our tour of New York included meanderings to places like



**Corpus Christi Church,  
Manhattan**



**Baptismal Font,  
Corpus Christi Church**



**Merton's Apartment House,  
Perry Street, Greenwich Village**

furthering mutual respect among the world's sacred traditions." Dr. Edward Kaplan of Brandeis University addressed us and once again we were amazed at Merton's vast network of friendships with thinkers and spiritual people across religious, cultural and political boundaries. In those pre-internet days, he had his own world-wide-web. In this case we learned about Merton's friend, the late Abraham Heschel, and again the themes of spiritual pilgrimage, of peace and understanding, of strength and grace came to the fore.

So ended our hunt for the unicorn in New York City. Now the job is to integrate all these sightings, to think on all these things: the Lady New York that Merton both loved and hated; Thomas Merton himself, twentieth-century mystic, mythic thinker, priest, poet, monk; Thomas Merton's writings, his searchings, his seeing; Thomas Merton and his contemporaries, his web of writers, thinkers, activists; Thomas Merton and pretty much everything – including the attentive, articulate, extraordinary pilgrims who trekked the length and breadth of New York City with me, hunting the unicorn.

Harlem where Merton worked for a time, Greenwich Village where he lived for a time, some pubs where he drank for a time. We were given lots of free time to absorb, enjoy, get lost in the City. A great city like New York makes connections for you, by its museums, galleries, libraries, bookstores, theatres – somewhat in the manner of a poet or thinker such as Merton who makes connections that you would not have seen on your own. It seemed that in New York, every experience enhanced, built upon, connected with what we were learning about the many-faceted life of Thomas Merton. Everything connected. The Metropolitan's exhibition, "Art of the First Cities," which explored the emergence of the world's first city-states in Syria and Mesopotamia (third millennium BC), brought to mind Abraham leaving Ur to follow God, and Thomas Merton leaving New York to seek God in the monastic life. Our visit to The Jewish Museum further evoked the experience of sojourning, of displacement.

Our final day was spent at the Jewish Theological Seminary, where we were guests at a book launch for *Merton and Judaism* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), a book "dedicated to



**Tour Leaders Judith Hardcastle (l.) and Don Grayston with fellow pilgrims Susan Cowan and Sharon Moore Cooke**

### Lady

The stacked-up, stone-loaded, steel-tracked  
 weight of her  
 the marble-columned, wrought ironed, carved wood  
 weight of her  
 the boatload after boatload fullness  
 of her belly  
 and still not weighed down,  
 she keeps giving,  
 takes every hit and keeps ticking.  
 What a worker! What a piece of work!  
 What imagination! Quelle joie de vivre!  
 New York City, she is *some lady!*  
 House of the Redeemer  
 7 E. 95<sup>th</sup> St.  
 New York City  
 May 2003

1. 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) 125.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 6; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.