

# Thousands of Words: A Bibliographical Review

Some of Merton's "Difficulties"; His Continual Writing Process;  
and Some Implications for Readers "Caught in Civilization"

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"Most sorry. If you knew. I get buried under manuscripts everyday of my life, they are lying all over the place, they are blocking the view, they are falling in my food" (Letter, 9-13-65).

## I.

Merton's thousands of letters will NOT be assimilated quickly. Similarly, this is the case for the entire body of his writing about which he himself admits he had a hard time keeping track. He spent his mature life learning how to work *and* pray, and he wrote hundreds of persons for thousands of reasons. It is therefore (especially at this early stage of knowledge about the complexity of the correspondence and its relationship to his other projects—poetry, journal, essays, etc.) presumptuous to think an individual or group of scholars can now assimilate such remnants and reflections of Merton's energetic diversity and awe of God. Yet because he wrote so much we enter into dialogue. Clearly for this monk/artist—pen, pencil, or typewriter close at hand—the process of building language systems to ponder mysteries became basic. Paradoxically, this meant he could never fully think things through as he dealt with the continuing crises of his life because ultimately he was able to sense that for many things no definitive answer exists. However, he spent his monastic vocation writing and clarifying intuitions about his understanding of humankind's relationship to God and the intricate web of culture.

We also remember that Merton came to the realization that over-used words can sometimes be hindrance as well as help, and thus readers have to bear a similar lesson in mind: sometimes it is best not to pursue "understanding." Yet all those words are there, and we keep returning to them, as best we can. Merton was, no doubt, a compulsive notetaker, writing first to himself and for himself, but always also for others. He was ceaselessly writing poems, essays, journal entries, letters and in the process outlining correspondences between insights and situations within and beyond himself, and thereby constantly asking questions and seeking to encourage others.

This review-essay builds on the idea that his many and continuing "difficulties," and questions, are a gift to an immense range of readers, but a gift exceedingly difficult to assimilate because of size and complexity. His range of interests and varieties of writing were continually expanding. To absorb the bulk of such an enormous deposit, Merton's gift of openness, is more than isolated readers can even imagine. Scholars have only begun such an endeavor. In the meantime individuals must remain content with nuggets extracted from the motherload of total accomplishment. Much can be utilized, but (and this is the paradoxical key) the ultimate assimilation cannot be done only through words. Merton teaches his readers to accept, to celebrate, but also to be quiet in addition to pouring out words in lamentation.

As the mature Merton (the final decade) became more aware of his need to reach out and make connections beyond the monastery, he also found methods to focus energy (prayer and work) and to devise ways to write about subjects of increasing importance in relation to issues beyond the cloister. This necessitated a kind of balancing between assuming too much responsibility and involvement and retreating into solitude and the pursuit of the contemplative life. Because of his enormous energy, it remains questionable that he himself felt he fully achieved a correct balance. He often expressed his realization that he wrote too much, and thus it is not accidental that (as scholars and readers) we continue to have a difficult time knowing what to focus upon. All Merton's words seem valuable, but at this point it is clearly impossible to absorb it all, or even the bulk of it. We have to learn to be content with a myriad of glittering pieces and this can be frustrating. We wonder if our difficulty is not like Merton's, finding it hard to know when to speak, and when to be quiet? We have to be satisfied with questions but few definitive answers, and we have to realize

that Merton's engagement in the mystery of questioning is part of his gift.

Some 7,500 letters of Merton's are extant. There may be hundreds more because we suspect some letter holders have not surrendered them to research libraries. To read all of these letters in their proper context—which would necessitate reading both sides of the correspondence and understanding what caused Merton to generate related work—would be an immense chore. In the five volumes of selected letters now published, we have access to the bulk of approximately 2,252 of these letters. (There are omissions of passages.) This project, a labor of love by the four editors involved, is now complete and will be the subject of some limited comments at the conclusion of this review-essay. The General Editor of the correspondence, William H. Shannon, is to be commended for designing and shepherding this immense project. His fellow editors, Robert E. Daggy, Patrick Hart, and Christine Bochen have provided a valuable compilation of primary materials and related editorial information.

The final volume, *Witness to Freedom*, subtitled "Letters in Times of Crisis" (Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994, \$25.00) is quite interesting *both* because it helps frame the continuing complex concerns of the writer and because it also clearly reflects some of the difficulties which the editor must have faced as he made selections and arranged them under the categories developed for this book. Shannon must have felt many constraints of choice and space at every step of the way as this final selection of letters was executed precisely because Merton never ceased to be engaged in overlapping issues, or crises, while he also saw involvement as necessary, yet, a trap. But what is any crisis, Ezra Pound reminds us in his *ABC of Reading*, but opportunity?

Pound also noted that the Chinese calligraphic symbols for crisis and opportunity are the same. Merton clearly sensed something like Pound, and such a realization contributed to advances both in his writing and in his spiritual life. During his final decade, as insights came flooding in, Merton found himself working and praying through a continual series of questions, opportunities, and crises. Any easy separation of living, spiritual life, and writing about life must have largely ceased to seem valid. Father Louis's need then, especially in the 1960s, and that is when the bulk of these letters were written, was to write carefully so he would not feel guilty of inaction during a time of genuine civic, political, and racial disorder, yet also to write in ways

which reflected prudence, and hopefulness, and even the need sometimes for inaction.

Continually, he found himself expressing thoughts of urgency, as on November 30, 1962, perhaps one of the most critical moments of his life because of questions about impending nuclear war:

. . . Let me say . . . my own position here is one that puts me in difficulties. As a member of the Order I have to be careful not to involve the Order itself in my statements. . . . I have been asked to go easy in controversial statements, but I generally do not go easy enough (*Witness to Freedom*, 85).

Such an honest statement serves as a paradigm for much of Merton's continuing and sometimes perplexing involvement in a myriad of interrelated issues. Sometimes he felt he had to speak, while at other times he knew he should be silent. The question always seemed to remain, how to produce the correct letter (or essay, or poem) at any particular moment. Such a convergence of questions and opportunities, especially toward the end of his life, must have been exceedingly complicated. Merton recognized the range of contemporary issues which demanded examination while he also realized more that he was called to center his own life. Also, his many questions were often about interrelated issues: Solitude, Monastic Life, War, Grace, Church, Ecumenism, Race, the question of Writing itself, etc.

It is also significant that toward the end of his life the pace of Merton's writing activities and letter production sped up. Several things converged. He had become more a quasi-public figure; this was the time (after 1965) when he was freed of being Novice Master, and at least theoretically when he had more time for reflection, while it also was a time when many crucial issues seemed unavoidable for a reflective person. Thus, he felt compelled to pursue a range of questions. The four preceding volumes of letters would also illustrate this accelerated change of pace—a sense of urgency which came as his last decade unfolded. It is as if Merton knew he might not live a long time, and therefore had to speak, to exchange ideas, and encourage others as they too puzzled through the entrance into the post-Christian era. Such a pattern flashes throughout *Witness to Freedom*, but interestingly, there is also a calmness radiated throughout the bulk of this collection which is also worth observing in detail because it reveals the complexity

of Merton's letter-writing process. Sometimes his calmness is expressed through humor and irony.

Merton is engaged, always involved, yet he usually remains quite careful about his language (Is it in some cases that Shannon deletes a controversial item?). Generally he does an excellent job of sorting out individual pieces observed in relation to his life, the life of his community, Church, and the wider society. In fact, often his sought-for balance is achieved. But to perceive such balance—and here we return to the difficulties of reading Merton—we have to accept the separate letters as only nuggets from that bigger motherload. Scholars are now learning to do this with still other parts of the Merton canon as well.

## II.

Recent books about Merton clearly reflect interpretative difficulties which radiate from the immense volume of the total body of his writing. Ultimately it becomes a matter of how to choose items and thereby to make sense of these vast literary remains, that is to choose words to make sense of living as Merton did. There are no easy answers—especially when there are so many words, but opportunities are everywhere. Basic to the dilemma of sorting through the immensity of Merton's work (published, unpublished, edited, selected) is how to remain calm and focused when the possibilities for interpretation and inspiration are vast. Two 1994 books reflect the opportunities for mining Merton's gift from the myriads of possibilities of potential catalytic materials. These books reflect trends: others like them exist. (We now have, for example, a small shelf of books which provide quotations from Merton's goldmine: for meditations; for retreat; as reflections, etc. . . . Jim Forest published such a book in 1994: *Finding Your Centre, A Journey with Thomas Merton* [London, Hunt & Thorpe]. It is in that publisher's Everyday Spirituality Series.)

As already indicated, apparently it is Merton's quality of calmness, sometimes a hidden serenity in the writing, which allows admirers to choose what seems to be needed for particular interpretations. This is what the editors of the five volumes of selected letters must have learned as they carefully selected items to make the relatively compact selections for those books: social concerns; friendship; religious life; literary matters. Editors must pick, choose, and focus, yet this is

both asset and liability for with any selection from Merton we always think we have answers, but, of course, what is proven is that we have only part of one.

The 1994 books by Waldron and Simsic demonstrate both the complexity and value, but the difficulty, even the allusiveness of reading Merton. Each is quite limited in approach, yet both promise to be of value for particular readers who seek models for particular ways of spiritual searching. It is not very helpful to schematize what these quite different authors offer from Merton, for one suspects that both studies were conceived with the hope that an active reader-participant would use these overviews as beginning points for what must be a journey. It occurs to me that one problem with Merton's life journey is that while he had accepted the vow of stability, in some ways he could never really feel at home. Thus his voluminous writings, and especially the letters, became his way to journey beyond the confines of his adopted home, a place about which he continued to feel ambivalent for most of his life. (That ambivalence is fundamental to the writing process itself.) A danger of Robert Waldron's book is that it appears to provide answers which are too easy, even simplistic.

Waldron has provided a Jungian reading which suggests Merton's life was a successful integration: Merton himself would not be so sure. Called *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul, A Jungian Perspective* (Notre Dame: Ava Maria Press, 1994, 157 pp., \$7.95), this quiet book (reviewed elsewhere in this volume) could serve to introduce Merton to persons with a Jungian interest, or it could demonstrate how Jung can be used to interpret Merton. (A glossary of terms is included, so this is fairly basic material.) Waldron's approach is limited in what it can do to illuminate Merton's "search." It is sometimes oversimplified, and as a perhaps strained overview of parallels between Jung's insights and Merton's spiritual journey it seldom goes beyond the predictable.

*Merton in Search* covers only a small amount of material and this is squeezed to fit the mold. There are useful comparisons made between Jung's perspectives about individuation and integration and Merton's spiritual journey, and no doubt Merton's spiritual movements can be profitably viewed with such a grid. (But so could all lives.) And as Walker Percy has insisted when asked about the Jungian patterns in his fiction (and life), such psychologizing cannot ever account for the mystery of how a particular individual exists in the intersection

of space and time, nor account for the relationship of that person to Jesus Christ who entered history and thereby changed all history. What remains unique is the mercy of God and grace for each separate individual.

Waldron's book is a "commentary" about limited aspects of Merton's life. Valuable points are made as he illustrates Merton's movement toward "completeness" (15). In Chapter One (Death of a father and shadow); in Two (about early years and shadow projection); in Three ("Experimentation with Personae") and in succeeding chapters basic patterns are isolated and described. Chapter Four is about "False Self and True Self." Chapters Five through Eight—often through a consideration of particular passages—demonstrate how Merton clearly sensed that he should better integrate his personality. (Don't we all?) In the parts about "Anima" and "Dreams" (Chapters Six and Seven) basic patterns of synthesis are observed. The problem seems to be that Waldron squints to provide his reading of the data. He rightly points out that more evidence is probably available in unpublished materials. As an exploratory first step this commentary will be helpful to some. As an examination of Merton's psyche, this must remain a severely limited beginning.

The second book, by Wayne Simsic, by its nature, provides no easy answers because it seeks to put the reader to work. Merton becomes a companion, someone as friend who reveals himself to readers who dispose themselves to prayer. Simsic's book *Praying with Thomas Merton* (Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's Press, 1994, 125 pp., \$9.95) is altogether different from Waldron's grid. It is a guide for praying, and while its organization is clearly defined, responsibility is placed on the active reader. As a means toward contemplative prayer, Simsic uses basic patterns in Merton's writing which will serve either to introduce readers to Merton, or utilize Merton as a means for refining one's need for quiet prayer.

Simsic's procedure is to present basic Merton themes and quotations so the reader can build. Thus, general suggestions are made about how to pray (with Merton as the resource person) and how to employ these materials to one's advantage. An overview of Merton's life (15–32) sets the stage. Then fifteen "Meditations" are provided: "Turning Back to the True Self" (#1); "Prayer of the Heart" (#6); "Social Concerns" (#11); and "The Quest for Unity" (#15). In each instance a story about Merton is provided; then an appropriate selec-

tion of his words; a reflection, or some suggestions; and a closing "God's Word." Simsic stresses that the person who uses his book is under no obligation to follow all its exercises. The book is meant as stimulant and will serve well those who can enter into its suggested quietness, but then move on from Merton. The book is nicely printed, attractively designed, and will work well to draw properly disposed persons into the life of prayer.

Still another related book, while it appeared two years earlier in Germany, can be mentioned for it neither imposes a grid nor provides explicit directions about how to use Merton. Since it is an example of a book similar in intention to both the *Forest* and *Simsic* books (someone should write an extended essay and compare all such books), and also because it is an example of Merton's widening worldwide appeal and usefulness, how Merton is mined, it seems appropriate to provide limited commentary about it because it is unknown to North American readers. This recent German collection of Merton pieces done by Bernardin Schellenberger, *Zeiten der Stille* [Times of Stillness], is skillfully collected, translated and commented upon (Ausgewählt, herausgegeben und erläutert: Freiberg: Herder, 1992 [Band 4107 in Spektrum Series]). It is evidence of Merton's widening audience and clearly designed for European readers unfamiliar with Merton. It is a success because, it seems to me, it demonstrates the open-endedness fundamental to Merton's life quest.

Schellenberger's book is arranged thematically with editorial connections dispersed throughout. With selections from *Raids on the Un-speakable*, other pieces on silence, and careful selections from *The Sign of Jonas* near the beginning, a quiet tone is set. The commentary is excellent. As the book evolves (and it is more than just selections plunked down) Schellenberger speaks less and less, and Merton is allowed to take over. Toward the end of the book poetry is included. There are sixty-two items of commentary, but these editorial comments become shorter and shorter as the book develops. The book is a success because it hints at questions Merton raised about monasticism, love, the world, etc., but it does not push any radical interpretation. This is truly a collection of texts which allows the reader to participate in interpreting Merton. Schellenberger's commentary is insightful, good enough that the German could be translated into English and Merton's words printed again to provide a valuable introduction for English speakers who need to hear about these themes of solitude and quiet.

### III.

Much recent periodical scholarship about Merton also recognizes that, for the time being, we will have to remain content with looking carefully at separate reflections of his sometimes frustrated, yet ever-widening consciousness, a consciousness also of human limitations in the presence of God pondered, and only slowly articulated. I have selected four representative articles which are valuable in this connection for this essay because they represent scholarship which recognizes difficulties of analysis, but which do not force an interpretation. Each article also reveals aspects of Merton's continuing (continual) writing process.

Michael Casey's "Merton's Notes on 'Inner Experience' Twenty Years Afterwards" (originally published in *Tjurunga* (1993) is included in *The Undivided Heart: The Western Monastic Approach to Contemplation*, (St. Bede's, Petersham, Mass., 1994). While I have not examined this book, I can recommend it on the basis of this "Inner Experience" article which feeds into the book: Casey demonstrates how Merton's unfinished manuscript reveals a continuing process of pondering.

Casey's analysis of the unpublished "Inner Experience: Some Notes on Contemplation" confronts the fact of its "eclectic juxtaposition of *overlapping*, but not synonymous propositions" [my emphasis] which creates both a sense of incompleteness and a total effect "which is dynamic" (21). Thus, Merton sees that contemplatives can serve as "bridges between different traditions" (34). Casey shows how Merton drew on St. Thomas, Maritain, and the wisdom literature of the Christian tradition and he also points out that for Merton dread remains a fundamental ingredient of what any serious contemplative must face. As an overview (See especially Section 4 "Experience of Contemplation"), Casey's synthesis is incisive. The article is a good example of a scholar dealing with the complexity of Merton's never remaining satisfied with straightforward answers. It is also quite a valuable analysis of this never-to-be finished manuscript which contains many valuable insights despite the fact that all its pieces cannot fit perfectly together.

Two more articles which merit extended notice appeared recently in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*. They also approach Merton's work in a related manner by dealing with the incomplete nature of fundamental aspects of his work:

1) William R. [should be H.] Shannon's "Reflections on Thomas Merton's Article: 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude'" (vol. 29, no. 1, 1994, 83-91) is a longer version of the address which Shannon gave at the Third International Thomas Merton Society Meeting at Colorado College in 1993. That "Keynote" lecture was planned so various respondents provided reactions in panels. Two of those responses, by David Belcastro and Patrick Eastman, were revised for *The Merton Annual*, vol. 7 (1994).

The beauty of Shannon's expanded article is that he provides considerable information about the textual history of Merton's "Notes" as well as information about censorship, revisions, etc. Shannon suggests the complex development of this article, and importantly, explains his own difficulty in understanding these "Notes" because he first thought the essay must contain "a full blown philosophy of solitude" (89), yet he finally states "there is no careful progression of thought . . ." (89). It is unfortunate that this longer version was not made available for the respondents at the I.T.M.S. Meeting—although it is interesting to see that both Belcastro and Eastman, in the preceding volume of this annual, do develop many of the questions which Shannon examines, especially about the dangers of solitude.

2) Richard E. Getty's "The Polychrome Face of Contradiction: Assessing Inconsistencies in Thomas Merton" (vol. 28, 3-4 [1993, published 1994], 281-296) is a thorough study of some not so surprising aspects of Merton's thought. This analysis is valuable because it both traces contradictions and inconsistencies and assures us because Merton kept growing, and therefore remained "critical of himself" (295), we must admire and learn from him. Therefore as Getty draws some implications, he stresses:

The stark face of contradiction, as illustrated in Merton and present in ourselves, invites us to stay close to the actual terms of our personal experience. If we are honest about the presence of contradiction in ourselves, we will be led to reaffirm that we are saved *through* our humanity and not *from* it (295).

A final article to be commented upon in some detail helps explain what some observers might consider to be inconsistencies in Merton's religious preoccupations. Bonnie Thurston's "Thomas Merton's Interest in Islam: The Example of *Dhikr*" (*American Benedictine*

*Review*, 45, no. 2 [June 1994] 131-141) stresses that while Merton has been recognized as a figure in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, his interest in Islam remains less well-known. Thurston points out that Merton's interest in Islam goes far beyond "scattered references in talks and writings." The question addressed skillfully by her is why? Several answers are provided: first, Merton held many beliefs in common with the Muslim community including central Islamic concepts "like the unity of God (*Tawhid*) and the revelation of God (*Tanzil*) (135); second, he found the Sufi's metaphorical and "nonlogical" expression of the truths of religion "congenial" (135); and third, and most importantly, his interest in Sufism went beyond themes or style. "He deeply appreciated the Sufi analysis of the human spiritual condition" (135).

Thurston's article focuses primarily on the prayer method called *dhikr*, the final and characteristic Sufi practice, translated "recollection" and "invocation." This practice has been described by Islamic scholars as "the central means of worshiping God and invoking his presence" (138). This technical term, signifying the "glorifying of Allah" is, in fact, a means whereby God can be known experientially. This is basic to Merton's insight and it is clear that he spent considerable time in the study of *dhikr*. He was also well aware that this form of prayer was similar to that "practiced by the hesychasts in Christianity" (138). Merton had isolated an important point for dialogue between Christianity and Islam. Similarities between this practice and the invocation of the Jesus prayer are noted by Thurston, and what Merton learned, for example, from a correspondent, Abdul Aziz and other sources, suggests his profound understanding of the relationship between our being named by God and our naming of God "might never have occurred had he not studied Islam" (140). The article emphasizes that the issue of Merton's interest in Islam cannot be definitely answered, yet it is clear Merton's knowledge of *dhikr* allowed him to strengthen his Christian vocation.

The four articles singled out for commentary in the preceding section (about "inner experience," solitude, contradictions, and Islam) suggest the range of good work being done on Merton, but also suggest the difficulty of keeping materials in focus which are far ranging. In each instance, Merton's subject matter pursued might allow book length studies about these large subjects. The same is true of many of the germinal suggestions, articles and notes which appear frequently in *The Merton Seasonal*.

Most readers familiar with *The Merton Annual* will know the *Seasonal* for it serves as a kind of clearinghouse for persons with Merton interests including the members of the International Thomas Merton Society. With editor's comments, bibliographical listings, poems, sermons or homilies, articles, notes and announcements it is also a mine of information. Interestingly, its format reflects some of the problems of assimilation noted earlier. There is so much, by and about Merton, that to sift all becomes difficult. In the bibliographical listings for the four 1994 issues there are 216 items by and about Merton listed. Within the *Seasonal* during 1994, along with comments, notes, memoirs, etc., there were at least eight short articles, and two are especially significant in the light of the points I have already made in this essay: they suggest large subjects waiting for further investigation. In fact, books might develop from the methodology used in the articles by Gary Charas Behara ("Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire*: A Poem of Psychotherapy" (vol. 19, no. 2, 14-17); and Patrick O'Connell, *Thirty Poems After Fifty Years* (vol. 19, no. 3, 13-17). In both these instances careful acknowledgement of preceding scholarship reveals systematic thought. Both these insightful articles suggest more book-by-book analysis of Merton's work would be rewarding. We might also note as Behara does *The Geography of Lograire* (also a draft, a beginning like all those letters) "does not end with solution . . ." (18).

#### IV.

Considerable recent writing about Merton, especially because the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death was commemorated in 1993, has either a celebratory or commemorative tone. This large body of material will not be commented upon here in any detail, yet it should be noted that it frequently reveals some of the difficulties of assimilation about which I have been commenting. His fellow Cistercians (in Spain, France, etc.) have provided collections of articles in quarterlies: testimonials and articles which outline his accomplishments. Many of the pieces published in the *Seasonal* work the same way. All this is too numerous to analyze here.

In the quarterly, *Collectanea Cisterciensia*, published by the French-speaking Cistercians, there are several articles which provide an overview of Merton's accomplishment. These can be found in vol. 56, no. 1 (1994); the authors are Charles Dumont, André Louf, Jacques Brière,

Bruno Ranford, and Robert Lecharlier. Similarly, an issue of the Cistercian publication of the Spanish speaking branch of the Order, *Cistercium*, 197 (1994) also recognizes Merton's accomplishment with a special section of articles. That group of pieces reprints some Merton poems, and includes articles by Robert Daggy, Fernando Beltran Salvador, and Francisco R. de Pascual.

A new publication in England, *The Merton Journal*, produced by the Merton Society of England, published two issues in 1994, and produced eight brief articles. These range from short pieces by well-known Merton commentators including Monica Furlong and Esther de Waal to reflective pieces about general topics, talks given in churches, or an examination of a well-known poem, "Grace's House." Bernard van Waes's essay on Merton and the Shakers draws some valuable parallels (vol. 1, no. 2, 44-51). An article by Thomas Del Prete on ". . . Merton's Admiration of Julian of Norwich" (vol. 1, no. 2) is almost identical to the piece which he published in *Spiritual Life* in 1993 (vol. 39, no. 4 [Winter 1993] 209-217). All this activity is clear indication of Merton's growing appeal.

Still more international activity is evident from Asia to South America. An article about some of Merton's interest in Spanish language writers was published in a Japanese publication: "Lo español en Merton" appeared in *Sapientia, The Eichi University Review* (Osaka) about Merton's Spanish language interests (no. 28, February 1994). Still other evidence of a continuing interest in Merton is reflected in a collection of his writings produced in Argentina in 1993, *Hermana American*, with a reprinted preface by Ernesto Cardenal and a new essay by the compiler Miguel Grinberg. Still other publications have recently appeared in Sweden, Germany, and England. Kurt Remele's "Prophetischer Radikalismus und seine Kritiker" (*Stimmen Der Zeit, Marz 1994, Band 212*) is an overview of the Berrigan brothers' activities with some mention of Merton's relationship to them. Catharine Stenqvist's "Thomas Merton and his view on Contemplation" (*Studies in Spirituality*, 3/1993) provides an overview of Merton's views about contemplation, most notably Zen Buddhism. Paul Pearson, from England, published an article in *Hallel*, an Irish publication, "Celtic Monasticism as a Metaphor for Thomas Merton's Journey" (vol. 19, no. 1, 1994, 50-57). Most of the international publications which I have surveyed remain fairly basic in their analysis of Merton. Pearson's competent essay (derived from an I.T.M.S. paper in 1991) is superior both as a

specific analysis of parallels which Merton realized between the monastic life and *The Voyage of St. Brendan* and as a hint for Merton scholars about how they need to come to understand that Merton's journey is one that takes place on several levels—self, humanity, and God blend when one sees that reading, praying, journeying, appreciation, loving (indeed writing itself) are things done not just as an exercise for self, but as ways of being unified with others in the mystery of existence in God.

## V.

In the preceding parts of this review-essay, I have suggested both assets and liabilities of Merton having written so much and the difficulties of assimilating this vast body of material. In sections II-IV I outlined recent studies about Merton and suggested that often there is more there than can be easily chewed and digested. Now I want to focus on the fifth volume of selected letters because this book, discussed earlier, *Witness to Freedom*, will be of immense value for Merton readers, just as the preceding four books of letters. But as also already suggested, as selections (often with ellipsis marks indicating an omission, and (alas) sometimes with omissions lacking any editorial signpost) these letters ultimately must be approached as reflections of Merton's immersion in the process of thinking things through. The following remarks about the complexity of Merton's letter writing would, I hope, apply to the limitations in using all the other letters collected in the preceding four selected letters volumes.

Shannon's excellent rubric of "crisis" is effective as an organizational device. Many types of crisis are readily apparent throughout these letters. Clearly one of the most important set of questions which Merton continued to face once he knew this was part of his responsibility was to face the dilemma of the Church's position concerning war. For Merton, of course, this meant that he had to work out a position for himself, and that required lots of words. Merton saw this as his opportunity to speak, but there are many difficulties too.

In the early 1960s the possibility of war was one of Merton's key concerns. And, for William Shannon who has edited still another book, *Passion for Peace*, which makes available most of Merton's writings about peace and war, this is also clearly the case. Probably this is one reason why all of the "Cold War Letters" are listed chronologi-

cally within the fifth volume, and therefore all can be easily located as they appear in the preceding four books. We hope that the new volume contains the complete "Cold War Letters" with no omissions. My cursory survey of Merton's bound mimeographed (unpublished) Cold War Letters reveals that in *Witness to Freedom* some significant omissions are made, sometimes with ellipsis and sometimes with no indications of an editorial change. (Why were not these letters included as a group in the original plans for selected letters?)

*Witness to Freedom* is much more than a collection of letters about peace and war, however, and just as the preceding four books of correspondence edited under the supervision of William Shannon, it covers a wide range of issues which radiate outward. This fifth book of selected letters therefore reflects Merton's ability to keep asking questions about a whole range of questions, from the nature of art to questions about vocation, about language abuse, as well as peace, etc. There are, as I said earlier, no easy answers. What is obvious is that there is much to be pursued while Merton insists there will be no quick answers. He ponders wisdom with his fellow artist Victor Hammer:

I have not rushed to reply . . . because it is most difficult to write anything that really makes sense about *this* most mysterious reality . . . the mystery of God—Hagia Sophia [Holy Wisdom]. The first thing to be said, of course, is that Hagia Sophia is God Himself. God is not only a Father but a Mother. He is both at the same-time, and it is the "feminine aspect" or "feminine principle" in the divinity that is the Hagia Sophia. But of course as soon as you say this the whole thing becomes misleading: a division of an "abstract" divinity into two abstract principles. Nevertheless, to ignore this distinction is to lose touch with the fullness of God. This is a very ancient intuition of reality which goes back to the oldest Oriental thought (4).

Here is the record of a monk/artist who will not stop thinking about the difficulty of expressing the most fundamental ideas about the mystery of God. He must therefore be cautious. Yet almost simultaneously he can pen other letters which reflect not particulars about theory, art, and theology, but his growing conviction that modern humankind has gone radically astray. In May 1962 he writes:

More and more I see that it is not the moral principles which are at stake, but, more radically, the whole outlook of modern man,



at least in America, and the basic assumptions which tend to guide his thought, if it can be called thought. We are living in an absurd dream, and a very bad one. And it is the fruit of all sorts of things we ought not to have done. But the whole world is in turmoil, spiritually, morally, socially. We are sitting on a thin crust above an immense lake of molten lava that is stirring and getting ready to erupt. Nothing will stop this eruption. But at least we can refrain from setting off bombs that will start it in some far worse way than it normally would (7).

His statement reflects an extreme urgency which he often felt as he announced the turmoil which was part of the entire culture. This is from that group of letters he called "Cold War Letters" and which were circulated in mimeographed form.

Shannon's inclusion of Merton's "Preface" to these letters establishes the context for what follows throughout the volume. (The other Cold War letters, as noted, are also listed.) Merton's sense of urgency is quite strong:

The protest in these letters is not, however, merely against the danger or the horror of war. It is not dictated by the fear that few lives might be lost, or that property might be destroyed, or even that millions of lives might be lost and civilization itself destroyed. The protest is not merely against physical destruction, still less against physical danger, but against a suicidal moral evil and a total lack of ethics and rationality with which international policies tend to be conducted (20-21).

We look forward to a single collection which will pull all these letters together with *no* omissions because Merton's urgency makes this group interesting as cultural commentary.

In Merton's view, humankind in the 1960s was standing at the edge of an abyss: Merton's call is for repentance, yet because he is capable of saying this in so many ways his words vary immensely according to circumstance. Thus, in December 1961:

. . . repentance means something far deeper than we have suspected: it can no longer be a matter of setting things right according to the norms of our own small group, the immediate society in which we live. We have to open our hearts to a universal and all-embracing love that knows no limits and no obstacles, a love that is not scandalized by the sinner, a love that takes upon itself

the sins of the world. There must be total love of all, even of the most distant, even of the most hostile. Without the gift of the Holy Spirit this is mere idealism, mere dreaming (23).

But this is also quite an opportunity. Other opportunities reveal themselves throughout the collection. In January 1963, he writes about his obligation, to a fellow priest, the Jesuit, John Ford:

. . . I am obliged, out of fidelity to Our Lord and to my priestly and religious vocation, to state very definitely some alternative to this awful passivity and lotus-eating irresponsibility which, in the end, delivers us all over bound hand and foot into the power of political forces that know nothing of God and morality, whether natural or divine. Sure, the theologians are divided, and the bishops rely on the theologians. But can't the theologians and the bishops say something? (29-30)

Which is to say, he, the monk/artist will speak. In May of the same year, with a large degree of irony, he writes to Justus George Lawler:

I am in trouble with my own book about peace. It appears that the Higher Superiors have suddenly decided that my writing about peace "falsifies the monastic message." Can you imagine that? . . . Let our ears not be contaminated with any news of what is happening. Let us go up in radioactive dust still blissfully imagining it is the twelfth century and that St. Bernard is roving up and down the highways and byways of old France preaching the crusade to troubadours and occasional jolly goliards, but not too jolly, it would falsify a message. Monks must preach to the birds, for the birds, and only for the birds (50-51).

He realizes his role is a limited one, but he also knows that by thinking things through, and continually writing, eventually he may be preaching for more than "the birds." Little by little the truth must be exposed.

Thus he keeps on addressing many issues. The following comment leads into an extremely perceptive comment about the feminine and false images. In June 1962 he writes to Valeria Delacorte:

The crisis of the world is, for one thing, a crisis of falsity. The enormous lies by which we live have reached a point of such obvious contradiction with the truth that everything is contradiction and absurdity (52).

In each of the four instances quoted it is as if we have a totally different writer. Merton adapts himself and the tone of his letter to the particular recipient and the circumstances of his relationship with that person. Sometimes severe, and sometimes witty, he can play many different roles. Keeping all those roles sorted out becomes a big job for the reader.

Often Merton's Cold War documents allowed him to move beyond concerns only about the dangers of war. It is especially significant to note that his "Postscript" for these letters was written to Rachel Carson, who anticipated much of the present ecological crisis. He wrote her on January 12, 1963:

Man's vocation was to be in this cosmic creation, so to speak, as the eye in the body. What I say now is a religious, not a scientific statement. That is to say, man is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. In maintaining this delicate balance, he must make use of nature wisely, and understand his position, ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible—in my terms, to the Creator, in any case, to the source and exemplar of all being and all life.

But man has lost his "sight" and is blundering around aimlessly in the midst of the wonderful works of God (71).

It is also important to note, however, that while he was urgently writing such letters Merton remained hopeful in the midst of perceptions of a world in crisis. He frequently stresses the interconnectedness of world issues and each person's individual responsibility. This is probably the chief reason why he wrote so many letters.

One of the most significant themes throughout these letters is the need for individuals to act. The individual, he was convinced, must assume responsibility, and for him that meant he had to keep on thinking and qualifying. Merton does this in myriads of ways: On May 15, 1961, he urges: ". . . we must purify our hearts and our faith, seeking the will of God not in a negative resignation only, but with every hope that He may show us some positive way of action that can counteract the forces that are inexorably advancing against the Church" (77). On February 12, 1963, he leaps in:

. . . you can quote me anytime as being wholeheartedly in favor of your plan, which seems to me to be a bold and original effort to meet the inhuman situation with some kind of human response:

with a gesture that focuses attention on the fact that what is at stake is man and not just a lot of pompous abstractions (86).

Or, in an "Open Letter to the Hierarchy" (which he must have wanted to be noticed), he writes:

Let us return to our principle: the task of the Council is to affirm the Church's eschatological message of love and salvation in terms which are most relevant to the modern world (91).

He can also write (on January 17, 1963), "I am very interested now in pushing forward the study of the more positive aspects of the question of peace—i.e., the theological bases of non-violence and of a social action based on redemptive love" (97).

Related to this unceasing conviction that individual responsibility is a key are Merton's frequent reflections about still another type of crisis—his personal reactions about his own life—which are reflected in all kinds of ways throughout the majority of these letters. Above all, Merton learned to face his own ambivalence, doubts, needs. There are numerous excellent reflections of this tendency which demonstrated his rethinking: In 1956 he can comment on the complexity of his life, one at that time filled with disappointments, yet also later qualified by his recognitions of his continuing need to write and qualify, to accept and celebrate. This letter is quite direct and honest:

The bitterness in me comes from the fact that I have at last opened up the area in which it is impossible not to notice that in all this solitude business and in my other outbursts of idealism I have been reliving all the brat experiences of my childhood, magnified and adorned (131).

Earlier (1954) he could carefully qualify his 1930s remembrances of his school recollections of Oakham. He insists the situation was much more complex than revealed in his autobiography. He writes:

. . . I am glad to be able to tell someone at Oakham that I really bear the school a deep affection, with sentiments of gratitude that will not die. I know that what I wrote about the school in my book was perhaps not flattering. But I am sure readers will have seen that I was not trying to describe the school objectively, but rather the state of my own mind there (155).

Letter by letter it becomes a matter of rethinking and qualifying and doing so to encourage others.

The monastic vocation he had settled into was worth pursuing, yet for others and for himself he had to keep asking questions. To a Carmelite nun he writes in 1952: "Do not feel that you have to wait until you find an ideal Carmel. There is nothing ideal on this earth. When I came to Gethsemani I knew it was only going to be partly what I 'wanted,' but I found God here anyway" (178). (Why isn't this letter in vol. 3?) Or he can write about his own situation in 1959, stressing that he has an obligation to his community: "Meanwhile I have modified my hopes and ideas by renouncing as impractical the thought of starting something among Indians. Whatever I do will have to have a clearly monastic stamp on it, one way or another, otherwise people just would not understand it" (205).

We learn that as early as 1947, he was writing notes and letters about the nature of contemplation: ". . . do we need a different system of contemplation (a different method of disposing ourselves for infused c[ontemplation]?" "In all the contemp. orders . . . spiritualities are all very much the same with only very minor differences. The problems are all the same: prayer based on the Presence of God, and kept as simple as possible, constant return to God's presence, . . ." (235), he asserts rather dogmatically.

However, by 1965 we have a different writer, and a far less dogmatic one, for now he knows he is not an authority:

At the moment I am trying not to be an authority on everything, so I am becoming silent on a lot of things I spoke of before and not speaking of new ones. I am getting out of anything that savors of politics, and I don't want to start talking about marriage since in any case I am not married and what I know of sexual love goes back to a rather selfish period of my life when I was thinking of getting and not giving. I am not qualified to speak on this subject, but I recognize your rightness, especially the excellent point about the imaginary woman replacing the concrete flesh-and-blood ones. This is really the key to the whole thing (248).

Clearly *Witness to Freedom* is a gold mine. Honest questions abound. Many sides of Merton are reflected. Many crises. But not all the crises are major ones. Humor is also important. Sometimes his job is simply to entertain. As he is contemplating his Asian trip he can

question (August 3, 1968) where the money is to come from for such extravagance!

I do have one little problem: that of raising some money to pay for the extra leg of my journey. My monastic rules don't allow me much freedom in going around giving talks, especially here. Exceptions are the benevolence of a few generous souls to help out. If you have any other ideas I would be happy to hear them. I am utterly innocent in the methods of getting money from foundations. I can always borrow on a future book (257).

Such money concerns are not for selfish reasons. At this point Merton seems almost like an "operator," but he is interested in making connections, religious and ecumenical, so that he can continue to make still more connections.

Taking any of these letters out of context for a book, or (much worse) for a review-essay such as this, makes it difficult to see the whole man and the total picture. I have quoted frequently to suggest the complexity of the volume and the enormous difficulties which the editor must have experienced as he made these selections from times of crisis. Merton keeps asking and planning and pondering, and wondering, and adjusting. We come along and read a letter or so, and think that we have an answer. Only partial answers are revealed. More complexities become apparent. He will write (June 6, 1959) that

it is true that there is a certain nobility in fighting for what we already have, because if we fail to do this we do not really have it. But it is best to remember that we already have it and that everything does not depend on the fighting. It is the great mystery of grace. Not grace in the sense of a kind of theological gasoline that you get by performing virtuous actions (that is the sin we commit!), but grace in the fact that God has given Himself completely to us already. Completely. But we have to enter into the darkness of His presence (261).

In other words, don't worry. Everything we have is already here.

A wonderful letter to Louis Massignon says this differently. It demands quotation and comment:

Louis, one thing strikes me and moves most of all. It is the idea of the *point vierge*, ou le désespoir accule le coeur de l'excommunié [ "the virginal point, the center of the soul, where despair corners the

heart of the outsider']. What a very fine analysis, and how true. We in our turn have to reach that same *point vierge* in a kind of despair at the hypocrisy of our own world. It is dawning more and more on me that I have been caught in civilization as in a kind of spider's web, and I am beginning to say "No" louder and louder, though surrounded by the solicitude of those who ask me why I do so (278).

Here it is also a matter, perhaps, of translation: Should this word *accule* be translated differently? Is this a rather prudish rendering? Should *l'excommunié* be translated "excommunicated"? Are there other places where other languages need to be more carefully translated? Is this the case for Merton essays, poems, and books translated into other languages? The important thing is that much can be inferred from this one enthusiastic comment to Massignon. It is perhaps the genesis of the basic organization of the volume *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. It is a wonderful example of Merton's continual thinking things through.

What all these letters demonstrate is a writer who can both realize the fact of continual crisis *and* continual opportunity. He realizes when we do have a responsibility to act, yet he frequently reminds readers that they are where they should be in relation to God. Yet we continue to act strangely. He keeps wondering why it should be that humankind should act so oddly:

We are living in a condition of endemic self-contradiction and frustration which is extremely dangerous, because each new move, each new spasm that goes through the Body of the Church makes us momentarily hope and imagine that we have not stifled the Holy Spirit: but then we discover, once again, or are in danger of discovering that we really have. (His voice, after all, is not easy to silence.) Then a new and more violent spasm becomes necessary, lest we hear Him and live (291).

And if this is the case, then it seems to Merton that

there is a most awful problem in this rootedness of the Church in permitted social structures and traditions, and the inevitability with which even in the best of moods and intentions we all fall back into a bland bourgeois stupor of self-congratulation and inertia. Even a lot of the activity has a character of inertia about it, it is so crude and so futile (308).

These 1963 and 1964 letters make it quite clear that for Merton contemporary culture is in a time of crisis and that the Church is part of the total mess. My point, and Merton's, is that it never becomes a matter of hopelessness. Thus he can say of the new *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, on August 30, 1966:

The situation of man today is one of dreadful crisis. We are in full revolution, but it is not the simple, straightforward old-fashioned political revolution. It is a far-reaching, uncontrolled, and largely unconscious revolution pervading every sphere of his existence and often developing new critical tendencies before anyone realizes what is happening. Now, I think that the Constitution, though it does vaguely recognize this, does not say enough to underline the real seriousness of the situation. . . .

Yet he will immediately qualify:

On the other hand I do not feel, as some do that the Constitution should simply have admitted frankly that the future promises little more than apocalyptic horror (316).

If we had unlimited time and space for analysis, similar patterns of crisis and hopefulness could be isolated and outlined from throughout all of the five volumes of correspondence now published.

What is needed is a way to study *all* of Merton's letters. We need to know what has been omitted; what other letters exist; the order in which all of them were composed, etc. To whom, for example, is Merton writing day-by-day and week-by-week? Such comprehensive studies might reveal paradoxically that the more he wrote—the more analytical and critical *and* hopeful he became, aware both of the complexity of a world in crisis and opportunities in that world—he also became more aware of a God whose mercy will not be easily explained.

## VI.

As has been demonstrated with the preceding analysis of some 1994 publications by and about Merton, and especially in the diversity reflected in volume 5 of the selected correspondence, we keep getting glimpses of a Merton-in-process. We will need far more details for future study and better ways of putting together the pieces. There is

no doubt that more and more primary material will appear. For the time being we will have to be patient.

In 1995 Orbis Books brought out a book of letters exchanged between Merton and Rosemary Ruether. Another large book of letters between Merton and his publisher, Jay Laughlin, is also scheduled to appear in the near future. Other correspondents, such as Jacques Maritain, and Jean Leclercq, are candidates for volumes of complete exchanges. The letters between Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, edited for this volume of *The Merton Annual*, also are evidence that there are many big projects waiting for other editors. Letters exchanged with various abbot generals would probably make a separate and revealing volume. All this will eventually be made available and will therefore slowly help us put some of the pieces together.

A similar kind of filling out of detail is in process with the voluminous journals. In 1995 the first of the complete journals of Thomas Merton (1939-1941) appeared under the title *Run to the Mountain*. The general editor for this journal project is Brother Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O., and with a team of five additional editors who are preparing individual volumes, the complete journals will appear during the next several years under the imprint of HarperCollins. This too is a mine of information which will eventually have to be related to what we already have.

What is ironic is the fact that Merton's life was one devoted in large part (at least his hope was this!) to moving away from words. The paradox of course is that he made such gestures continually, but he always had to do this with words. Obviously as readers we are stuck with this legacy. We learn to do the same thing which Merton learned to do over and over. The complete journals will give us one more layer of this complicated person, a Merton-in-process thinking things through, so that we might do some of the same.

Other primary documents exist which will also inevitably be made available for readers. There are scores of "Working Notebooks" which are records of Merton's voracious reading and note taking. There are also many obscure articles which have not yet been collected. There are, as has been noted, thousands more letters.

What is needed is word listings and indexes, and word studies which will help us to keep track of Merton's energy. A complete index for all five volumes of the published letters would be a help to readers. A chronological listing of when letters were composed would also help.

Where is the concordance to his poetry? Indeed to all his works? Such projects would be a good start for a group of computer scholars. But, we must remember it would only be a start and to enter fully into what Merton has accomplished we will have to enter into his world *both* of prayer *and* work. We have to see all these thousands of words and letters as but hints, invitations, suggestions, opportunities. Then we will have to be quiet.