

“Teaching Is Candy”: Merton as Teacher at Columbia and Bonaventure

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In one of his inimitable letters to literary soulmate Bob Lax, Merton, referring to his experience as an instructor in English composition in the extension program at Columbia in the fall of 1939, playfully exclaims, “Teaching is candy. Wotta happy clars!”¹ Precisely one year later, having spent several months teaching three sections of English literature to ninety sophomores at St. Bonaventure’s College, he reflects in his journal, “Literature is hard to teach. You cannot explain what is good easily, any more than you can explain Faith easily, or Love easily.”² This contrast in perspective suggests that Merton, though preoccupied in his search for spiritual and vocational direction during this time, was both engaged and challenged as a young teacher. It helps frame the effort to understand what being a teacher meant to him prior to entering Gethsemani, what he understood his work as a teacher to be, how he approached it, and what impact it had on him and his students.

In what sense might teaching have been “candy” for Merton? How did his experience teaching literature at Bonaventure differ from his experience teaching writing in the extension program at Columbia? What part, if any, did teaching play in his intellectual and spiritual de-

velopment at the time? How, conversely, did his prevailing intellectual and spiritual concerns, not to mention his intense search for vocational direction and identity in the religious life and as a writer, affect him as a teacher? What kind of a teacher was Merton? Does the young beginning teacher of 1939, ’40, and ’41 project any of the concerns or characteristics of the monastic mentor of the sixties?

By drawing on his reflections in his correspondence, journals, and *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and on the recollections of former students and colleagues, we may sketch Merton’s first teaching experiences and begin to answer some of these questions. What emerges as an overarching theme is his concern for linking learning in an academic sense to more existential matters. For Merton formal learning appears more often than not to provide a context for addressing fundamental life questions; it becomes an integral part of the process of discerning what is real or what matters in life, and something of one’s personal identity and purpose. If this is Merton’s overriding interest, even at this initial stage of his journey as a teacher, there are other matters of import as well: how to help others learn to read and write, to think clearly and form solid ideas, to understand, appreciate, and learn from art and literature. These concerns combine with the larger one to shape his pedagogy and his students’ experience.

Columbia

Apart from work as a Latin tutor during the previous year, Merton had no formal teaching experience prior to serving as an instructor in English composition for three nights a week in the Columbia extension program during the fall of 1939. Teaching seemed a logical enough pursuit for someone who had recently earned his masters degree in English literature, who had begun study toward his doctorate in the same field, and who had spent the summer feverishly turning out pages of a projected novel. Merton tells us in his autobiography that he “liked teaching very much. . . .”³ Yet it did not necessarily hold the most prominent place in the hierarchy of his vocational interests. Even as he declared to Lax that teaching was “candy,” he makes clear that he was interested in continuing in it only as a secondary option. As he explains it in Merton/Lax-talk:

1. Thomas Merton to Robert Lax, December 3, 1939, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

2. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. Patrick Hart, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995) 274.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1948) 274.

I got a chance to work full time as an instructor to Barnard College for girls only I don't think that will make me quit the [Franciscan] monastery because there is right now only violence or some sudden adverse judgement on the part of the monks could keep me out, and I guess if I wasn't to get into the monastery I would not be a cheerful fellow at all. Also I wish I knew when it was going to begin, because I am sick of novels, and although I am not sick of teaching, but like it better every time. Only I want to be a monk first and then teach and write next.

But still I am going to see the english dept guy about it . . . and I will make no attempt not to be hired, just in case there are delays about the monastery or trouble. And if I wasn't going into the monastery I would certainly like very much to teach in Barnard because I think it would be mild and suave and pleasant to instruct maybe one fine dame like Burton or Reilley or Eaton in a whole class of Camilles, even.⁴

If becoming a Franciscan was Merton's chief interest at this time, the prospect of teaching was by no means distasteful. Teaching engrossed him more deeply in subject matter he loved, invariably drew him into the experience of others, and confronted him with challenging intellectual and pedagogical issues. Midway through the teaching term at Columbia, the twenty-four-year-old instructor relates to friend Lax what he was discovering:

It is interesting and instructive to teach a class: it is not true that any of them are crazy at all, but nor is it true that many of them can write English. Also it is true that they are beginning to write better than before once they can write about their families and their summer vacations, which is nevertheless what they started out with. It is much easier to get them to write saying they really want to be blessed than saying they want to be smart, which as a matter of fact they do not so much care about, but were only told to care about in High School. Thus I love my class very much, individually more than in a lump and will in the future make a ges-

4. Merton to Robert Lax, December 3, 1939, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University. It took a good while for Merton to recognize teaching as an integral part of his life. After many years of teaching as both the master of scholastics and master of novices at Gethsemani, he reflected in his journal in 1962, "I usually ignore this element in my own vocation, but obviously I am a writer, a student and a teacher as well as a contemplative of sorts, and my solitude etc., is that of a writer and teacher, not of a pure hermit."

ture of biting off my tongue before I talk about crazies or stooopies for one minute.⁵

Merton seems to have been genuinely affected by his students' earnestness, by the need for identity and meaning that emerged in their struggle to write. That he tapped their desire to be "blessed" rather than "smart" is not surprising; it is telling, however, insofar as it points to Merton's role in fostering the openness necessary for nourishing this kind of self-disclosure and self-searching. To the extent that this is true, we can say that a person-centered philosophy drove Merton's teaching, what he might describe much later and with much greater understanding as a philosophy oriented to self-discovery; Merton, in other words, was concerned with linking learning how to write to the process of developing one's own ideas, and learning who one was and what matters in life.

As an instructor of English composition, Merton saw as his specific tasks teaching "students how to get up enough interest in things to write about them," and also teaching them how to read.⁶ He encouraged students to trust and tap their own personal experience as a motivational source for writing. He records in his journal the advice he gave them, advice he would follow faithfully himself: "I have spent weeks telling my class to write out of their own experience: and they write best when they do, too. They write almost good autobiographical short stories sometimes."⁷ To help them along, he provides them with examples of published autobiographical material, such as James Thurber's *My Life and Hard Times*.⁸

Merton established a clear pedagogy in grounding the process of learning to write in his students' personal experience. But his understanding of writing and language at this stage required something more besides, even for students at a beginning level of confidence and artistry. The act of writing implied a conscious and reflective stance on life. Merton reminds himself in his journal to tell the class how important a "writer's attitude towards life is," how much this attitude affects the way someone writes.⁹ Merton challenges his students to consider

5. Thomas Merton to Robert Lax, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989) 151.

6. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 274.

7. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 92.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 108.

writing not as an abstract or formulaic exercise, and not simply as a way to represent personal experience, but also as an expression of something fundamental about themselves.

While Merton's own experience as a writer was no doubt relevant, his reading and his reflection on teaching clearly interact in the formulation of his view of writing, and consequently in the development of his pedagogy as a writing teacher. He paraphrases William Saroyan's preface to *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* in his journal when he observes, "if [someone] writes remembering we must all, at some time or other, die, it is very important."¹⁰ He says he will probably read the Saroyan preface to the class; if he in fact did, then his students would have heard that Saroyan's "number one" rule was not to follow the rules laid down by others, and then the following:

A writer can have, ultimately, one of two styles: he can write in a manner that implies that death is inevitable, or he can write in a manner that implies that death is *not* inevitable. . . . If you write as if you believe that ultimately you and everyone else alive will be dead, there is a chance that you will write in a pretty earnest style. . . .

The most solid advice, though, for a writer is this, I think: Try to learn to breathe deeply, really to taste food when you eat, and when you sleep, really to sleep. Try as much as possible to be wholly alive, with all your might, and when you laugh, laugh like hell, and when you get angry, get good and angry. Try to be alive. You will be dead soon enough.¹¹

Merton adds that, beyond attitude, belief is important, noting specifically that whether a writer believes in God and in the redemption of the world by Christ would certainly be important. He then discusses his effort to get his students to understand the attitude toward life reflected in a particular piece (Thomas Stanley's *Exequies*), noting the lightheartedness in it, presumably in the deference paid to the "kinder flowers" that "can take no birth or growth" from the "unhappy earthe" of the speaker's grave.¹² Here is a concrete example of how Merton links learning to read with learning to write, and sets both against the background of a basic existential consideration of life.

10. Ibid.

11. William Saroyan, *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1934) 12–13.

12. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 108–9.

It is unclear, beyond this example of how they interrelated, how else Merton acted on his belief in the importance of learning how to read in relation to learning how to write in the Columbia class. We can be reasonably sure that he was referring to learning about what is meaningful and substantive in good writing, and how that is communicated, more than learning about style per se, and definitely more than learning about the rules of grammar. At one point in his journal he writes, "Everybody has been educated to read and write, but nobody has been educated in the things a man reads and writes *about*."¹³ In a letter written in 1963, he states that "the real joy of reading is not in the reading itself but in the thinking which it stimulates and which may go beyond what is said in the book."¹⁴ Teaching may very well have helped to nurture these insights.

As a teacher, not surprisingly, Merton was challenged as a learner, and particularly as a reader. During his first semester at Bonaventure he mused, "I often wonder if teaching literature hasn't been the first thing to make me really read the stuff. I feel as if I never had read any literature before!"¹⁵ To ensure that he was reading well, Merton took extensive notes, working through the thoughts his reading had stimulated. In a later journal entry he reveals: "I have been learning how to read. . . . Learned how to read Blake's 'To the Muses.' I read it to my sympathetic evening class. They shook their heads. I explained 'the green corners of the earth.' They fainted."¹⁶ It was one thing to learn yourself, quite another, particularly in the realm of literature, to enable others to do the same; as Merton said, "Literature is hard to teach."

In his first teaching experience Merton seems to have quickly reached the conviction that one learned to write not in the abstract according to prescribed rules, but first of all by deciding on something important to write about, in connection with personal experience and some of the big questions of life. This premise put at serious risk the primacy of grammar in the writing curriculum. Merton writes in his journal, "Filled with ideas to talk to the class about—grammar and usage. That grammar is not the art of speaking *correctly* but of speak-

13. Ibid., 144.

14. Thomas Merton to M. R. Chandler, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994) 165.

15. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 258.

16. Ibid., 271.

ing *logically*."¹⁷ Merton developed a strong belief in the importance of the "innate logic of language" over and against the mere correct and standardized usage typically implied by grammar. Indeed, language for Merton, as he works it out in response to the challenge to develop a working philosophy for the teaching of writing, had an organic quality; it was "a living, growing thing" with its own life. The "logic of language . . . is something like experience: it follows it closely, is not rigid but supple, imitates life."¹⁸ To constrain it too tightly by the imposition of rules and arbitrary structure was akin to subverting the natural order, and represented the kind of external control over mind, conscience, freedom, and spirit to which Merton then and later so strongly objected. Merton was concerned more for helping his students learn to write according to what was "logical and in good taste," in keeping with the particular context of the writing. Correct writing "is simply proper to its surroundings—its context," he wrote.¹⁹

By emphasizing grammar as the art of saying things rationally, Merton challenged students to consider the relationship of language to meaning, idea and their personal experience, and thus to relinquish any dependence on external formulas, thus in some sense to learn while exercising responsibly their independent judgment and freedom. He concludes his discourse on grammar on an anti-modernist note, "The modern incomprehension of the *kind* of thing grammar really is reflects the modern incomprehension of *respect for liberty and life*."²⁰ This would not be the first time that Merton would work through intellectual issues in his journals to help orient his teaching. In this instance, there was a very practical result. Merton declined an opportunity to teach grammar in the spring semester, asserting that "grammar was something I knew absolutely nothing about, and only the most constant vigilance had kept it out of sight in the composition class."²¹ He puts it differently to Lax, "I lost my section of English composition, and they were going to give me a class teaching spelling to old ladies instead, and I declined, saying no thanks for the offer of that stupid spelling class."²²

17. *Ibid.*, 41.18. *Ibid.*, 83.19. *Ibid.*, 41.20. *Ibid.*, 42.21. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 274.22. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, 152.

Based on his own description, Merton seems to have taught with a bit of serendipitous flair at Columbia, in his words, spending

most of the time throwing out ideas about what might or might not be important in life and in literature, and letting them argue about it. The arguments got better when they also included discussion of the students' favorite ideas, as expressed on paper. It soon turned out that although they did not all have ideas, they all had a definite hunger for ideas and for convictions.²³

Here Merton confronts in his own teaching the challenge of helping others produce their own explicit ideas and to establish their own inner certitude, a challenge he felt his mentor Mark Van Doren met so adroitly.²⁴ In striving to meet this challenge himself, he learned with some surprise the extent to which a teacher can influence students, in particular the ease with which a teacher can preempt a student's own thinking. As a case in point, we can take Merton's example of how a student responded to his insistence on "concrete and tangible evidence, in describing places and things" by blossoming out from a state of bewilderment

with a fecundity in minute and irrelevant material detail that it was impossible to check. He began handing in descriptions of shoe factories that made you feel as if you were being buried under fifty tons of machinery. And I learned, with wonder and fear, that teachers have a mysterious and deadly power of letting loose psychological forces in the minds of the young. The rapidity, the happy enthusiasm with which they responded to hints and suggestions—but with the wrong response—was enough to make a man run away and live in the woods [a statement that grew in irony over time!].²⁵

If Merton discovered something of the power of the teacher, he discovered it in relation to his students' "hunger for ideas and convictions." Merton fed this hunger by assigning writing topics such as "My Favorite Movie Star" and "Is It Possible To Be Happy Without Money?"²⁶ It was his students' ready response to topics such as these

23. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 274.24. *Ibid.*, 139.25. *Ibid.*, 273–4.26. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1959) 98.

that prompted his remark to Lax that "Teaching is candy. Wotta happy clars! They write essays about the funny sheet and the movies and now precisely I got them writing a big dirty argument whether money stinks and defiles the hands like pitch or not, and whether everybody ought to love everybody."²⁷

In Merton's teaching at Columbia we see at work in rough and embryonic form what might be described as his *modus operandi* as a teacher, and what is perhaps at the heart of all great teaching: his gift at framing learning not only as a process of attaining intellectual understanding and clarity and appreciation, but as a way to discover what is meaningful, real, and true in oneself and in life. By linking grammar, construed as the art of saying things rationally, and the question of one's basic "attitude towards life," to experience, he provided students with a path to learn that was in some sense respectful of life—and of their own particular lives—and subject to care and discipline. The personal and universal seem to have had a significant interplay in Merton's approach to teaching, even as they did in his writing, and even as they would so compellingly when he was master of scholastics and novice master.

As a student, Merton had noted with admiration Mark Van Doren's capability in helping others discriminate what was genuine in thinking and writing.²⁸ In later years he is explicit about cultivating this capacity as a teaching priority, and more explicit, in his few reflections on the subject, in placing the whole person at the center of education. To a bookstore manager in 1965 he writes that "a man or a woman goes to college not just to get a degree and a good job, but first of all to find himself and establish his true identity"; he says that this implies a capacity and freedom to choose from real possibilities, in turn implying a capacity to judge and to think. He goes on to say that "truth is important and the whole purpose of thinking is to be able to tell the difference between what is true and what only looks good."²⁹ These themes are amplified in his essay "Learning to Live," written in 1967 and published posthumously in 1969.³⁰ If we were to trace Merton's teaching through the monastic years we would see his gift at

27. Merton to Robert Lax, December 3, 1939.

28. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 139.

29. Merton to Mr. L. Dickson, *Witness to Freedom*, 169.

30. Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live," *Love and Living*, ed. Patrick Hart and Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

connecting learning and life at work over and over again, whether it be in asking novices in his written introduction to a course on the monastic vows in 1955, "How does one judge the value of [a person]?" or in introducing a talk on St. Bernard in the 1960s by saying, "What I really intend to do is not to talk about St. Bernard exclusively but to talk about *us*."³¹

Bonaventure

At St. Bonaventure it was not unusual for Merton or students to hitchhike to the center of town. One of his former students remembers somewhat abashedly going to town with friends and on the way picking up Merton, in his saddleback shoes, on the Saturday before the beginning of the fall term. The group good-naturedly "gave [Merton] a hard time," not realizing until the following Monday that the twenty-five-year-old newly appointed assistant professor, sitting cross-legged on his desk, clad in a corduroy sports jacket (Merton typically wore a tweed coat, according to another former student) with patches in the arms, tan pants, and the same saddleback shoes, would be their instructor in English literature.³² In another instance, Merton hitchhiked to town with a group, there joining them for conversation, he drinking a coke, they beers. (Merton did make Bonaventure the place for purging himself of what he then considered bad habits, a view, at least as it pertained to beer, he later, under monastic influence, revised!) According to a student in the group, Merton was always saying, "What do you want to do with your life?" Reflecting the times, this former student adds, "We never gave very good answers because we all knew if we got through college, then we'd go to the war."³³

This story seems more emblematic than apocryphal, both because the question pressed dramatically on Merton himself during this time, and because it exemplifies in some sense his belief that college ought to help students in realizing their true identity. It also strikes a neat parallel with Merton's accounts of the importance of his own personal encounters with teachers such as Dan Walsh and Mark Van

31. Thomas Merton, "An Introduction to the Vows," *The Collected Essays of Thomas Merton* (Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky); Thomas Merton, "Love Casts Out Fear," Conference Tape (Kansas City, Mo.: Credence Cassettes, 1988).

32. Interview with Robert Fenzl, May 18, 1995.

33. Interview with Cornelius Donovan, May 9, 1995.

Doren. This is not to say that the formation of students' identities was Merton's chief concern while at Bonaventure. He was intent on his own interior journey even while he was in the role of teacher, "very pensive," "kind of a loner," and "a little introverted," in the words of one former student;³⁴ "shy, bashful-acting," and "a quiet man," in the words of another.³⁵ Others retain this same image: "After class he seemed to be a loner. . . . He walked alone on campus;"³⁶ he was "other worldly, walked by as though in a trance."³⁷ A colleague remembers, "He never said too much. . . . He wasn't a recluse or anything like that; he just kept quiet for the most part."³⁸

If Merton seemed meditative and removed when alone, pondering life and his vocation, and, as he puts it, getting his soul "in harmony with itself and with God," his quietness when in a group was not necessarily detachment.³⁹ "He always listened very carefully," noted a colleague.⁴⁰ Nor was he shy about making noise on occasion. Both former colleagues and students remember his periodic playing of bongo drums at night in Devereux Hall, where lay faculty who needed housing and virtually all of the students lived. Recalls one, "He turned out not to be the best neighbor. . . . He played bongo drums. Bill Glynn [would yell], 'Cut out the bongo drums, Professor Merton, cut it out!'"⁴¹ Jim Hayes, a fellow lay faculty member, confirms that "he would go on sometimes for fifteen minutes, one-half hour. . . . He would lock the door—he was very good at it."⁴² His playing "used to annoy those of us who were studying. . . . [The sound] would reverberate throughout the corridor," declares a hallmate who lived three rooms down from Merton.⁴³ Perhaps Merton felt that his drumming would not grate any more than the yelling for "Cassidy," which he tol-

34. Interview with Edward M. Horey, January 5, 1994.

35. Interview with James F. Magill, May 15, 1995.

36. Interview with James Battaglia, May 9, 1995.

37. Interview with Leo Keenan, January 5, 1994.

38. John Gussom, videotaped remarks (St. Bonaventure Conference on Thomas Merton, 1988), Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

39. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 305.

40. John Gussom, videotaped remarks (St. Bonaventure Conference on Thomas Merton, 1988).

41. Interview with James Barnhurst, May 15, 1995.

42. Jim Hayes, videotaped remarks (St. Bonaventure Conference on Thomas Merton, 1988).

43. Interview with Fr. Joseph A. Ciaiola, May 9, 1995.

erated as part of the telephone communication system in the dorm.⁴⁴ James Peters remembers that Merton loved jazz, which he played on the same portable phonograph he had used as a student at Oakham, recalling specifically his fondness for "Big Noise from Winetka," a "Bob Crosby and the Bobcats" album.⁴⁵

Taken collectively, the impressions of former students (formed, it should be remembered, at the age of about nineteen, and offered fifty-four or more years later) portray Merton's classroom demeanor as a mixture in some proportion of distance and approachability, informality and seriousness, patience and animation. Marion Weis Horey, one of the few women who had Merton as a teacher (there were little more than a handful of full-time female students at Bonaventure at the time, and they were assigned to the night classes), recalls him as "a man apart, a very gentle, pleasant person, [but] in class kind of remote, almost in a world by himself, [though] very friendly."⁴⁶ Robert Fenzl puts it somewhat differently, describing Merton as "a nice man, very quiet, very knowledgeable; he wasn't an outspoken man, not an aloof man at all, but kept to himself."⁴⁷ Horey felt that Merton really did not know much about her, something, it is apparent, she wished could have been different. Her perception of the difference between Merton's understanding of literature and her own may also account for her sense of remoteness. As she explains it:

We'd read something, and he would see so much more in it than I saw. I realized from his class that I had a lot to learn. . . . He just did operate on another plane. I never felt that I could read poetry and get from it the thousand levels of meaning that he got.⁴⁸

Fenzl, for his part, remembers some of Merton's liveliness. "Oh, God, he was great," he enthusiastically comments. "He read *The Canterbury Tales* like they should have been read. . . . I didn't always understand all of them. . . . He explained it so thoroughly. . . . [He] made it seem easy. . . . [It was] not so hard as I thought."⁴⁹ Merton tried to help students in their effort at reading and understanding Chaucer by having

44. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 304.

45. Interview with James Peters, May 18, 1995.

46. Interview with Marion Weis Horey, January 5, 1994.

47. Interview with Robert Fenzl, May 18, 1995.

48. Interview with Marion Weis Horey.

49. Interview with Robert Fenzl.

them put some of the tales into modern English, noting that "this will probably severely tax their brains, and do violence to their tempers."⁵⁰

There can be little doubt that Merton was enamored with his subject. He tells us that the task of preparing his classes gave him significant "health and satisfaction and reward."⁵¹ His extensive class notes, kept in a neat notebook, attest to his diligence in preparation and to his thorough background in the classics of English literature. He begins the course with a discussion of language, focusing in particular on the origin and development of English as an Indo-European language, as a prelude to work on Anglo Saxon poetry, *Beowulf*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Chaucer and Milton receive considerable attention. Historical and literary timelines periodically appear in his notes; at one point, there is an elaborate page "PLAN for Treatment of Elizabethan Drama," which includes lists of relevant works under headings such as "Romantic Drama," "Tragic Tendency," and "Domestic Drama."⁵² Merton's class notebook reveals a careful and traditional treatment of his subject. In this respect he seems to have remained quite true to the description of the course provided in "The St. Bonaventure College Bulletin" for the 1940–41 sessions. English 201–202 was "a survey course of the chief periods of English Literature to define the more important forms. Aims to give the student an intelligent appreciation of the best literature and at the same time to provide him with the general literary background pre-requisite to the special courses in literature."⁵³ In commenting on his teaching responsibility, Merton mentions his "happiness" to be steeped again in the literature that had enthralled him as a child. He felt that he communicated something of this world to his students, concluding that "because they saw that I myself liked my own subject matter, they tolerated it, and even did a certain amount of work for me without too much complaint."⁵⁴

James Barnhurst corroborates Merton's view, declaring him "an inspired teacher. He really knew English literature and could get it

50. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 255.

51. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 305.

52. Thomas J. Merton, "English Lit. Class" (notebook), Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

53. "The St. Bonaventure College Bulletin," vol. XIV, January 1941, no. 1, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

54. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 306.

across to us. . . . Some of the big husky football players of the Pennsylvania coal country were equally smitten; he got them interested in English literature . . . a tribute to his ability as a professor."⁵⁵ Rita Ballard, herself for several years an English teacher, remembers Merton as "casual, laid back" and his class as "very interesting, lively, not very formal. . . . He always . . . made you want to do [the reading] without being very demanding. . . . [He had] an easygoing way, but did expect you to do it . . . [and] never embarrassed you if you didn't understand what he was trying to get to."⁵⁶

If he was motivating without being demanding, he seems also to have had a strong sense of deserving quality. Merton told Catherine de Hueck Doherty of a nun in his class who wrote an essay about what impressed her about St. Bonaventure, not least of all the visit of Baroness de Hueck herself, with whose views she evidently agreed. Merton goes on to say, "Well, I nearly gave her an A on the strength of this, but I didn't. Charity is one thing, art another." Any doubts he might have had about this assessment were erased when he discovered this student's too ardent affection for the understanding of grammar, which Merton mistrusted. "A for charity, B-plus for technique was what I gave the sister, only the first grade remained unspoken, and that was just as well too, because today she gave me a big argument about some obscure point of grammar."⁵⁷

In her recollections, Rita Ballard also notes with a trace of lingering indignation that "some of the profs [were] not too happy about having women in the classes . . . [but Merton] accepted us as part of the class."⁵⁸ Maurice Crisman describes Merton as "very patient" and "well-respected by all of his students."⁵⁹ He remembers as a sign of his thoughtfulness a compliment Merton gave him on an essay on the word "light," which he wrote in response to an assignment to write on one word.

Though quite at home with English literature, Merton was challenged as a teacher to read ever more carefully and to consider more closely the meaning and significance of what he read and what he had

55. Interview with James Barnhurst.

56. Interview with Rita Ballard, May 9, 1995.

57. Merton to Catherine de Hueck Doherty, October 6, 1941, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) 4.

58. Interview with Rita Ballard.

59. Interview with Maurice Crisman, May 9, 1995.

his students read. He wondered, as I have noted, whether "teaching literature [was] the first thing to make [him] really read the stuff." Issues arose in his classes that demanded careful reading and clarification. To cite an example, he wrote in his journal:

I have been very exercised about "literary truth" and "belief" since my classes thought that because Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was *truer* than Beowulf, it was because it was "more realistic." But a man riding around with his head cut off, holding it by the hair, and talking to people, is not realism.⁶⁰

Many years later, in the monastery, Merton would introduce novices to art and poetry, and to the truth illuminated about human experience to be found in literature.

Teaching at Bonaventure was not quite "candy" for Merton. Literature proved "hard to teach." It was hard to explain what was good and to avoid clichés in teaching an appreciation of literature. This difficulty was a sign of Merton's own respect for literature, of his determination not to reduce it to something less than what it was, but to let it speak somehow for itself. It was also perhaps Merton remembering the standard of teaching set by his mentor Mark Van Doren, who, he wrote, "being employed to teach literature, teaches just that: talks about writing and about books and poems and plays . . . [and teaches students] how to read a book and how to tell a good book from a bad."⁶¹ Marion Weis Horey provides a clue regarding how Merton managed in his effort to represent literature well in his teaching: "My impression [was that he] went out of himself in these writings. [You were] watching a man take a piece of literature and eat it up [and] let you enjoy the work with him. If you were up to it, good . . . he didn't show you how to do it."⁶²

Like Van Doren, Merton did not want to preempt students' thinking about and direct appreciation for literature, but instead foster it. Indeed, Merton's own artistic sensibilities in some sense demanded this educational stance. Toward the end of his first semester at Bonaventure, on a short visit to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, he noted with indignation "a class of high school girls, sitting on all the benches and even on the floor while their teacher dictated information,

all of which they busily and humbly took down in their notebooks."⁶³ The students never actually looked at the pictures in the museum. Art was a matter of seeing and responding, of learning about how to see and what to see and responding to it. A year before, after a visit to the art exhibit at the World's Fair, Merton had lamented in his journal those who read the names of painters off the frames and neglect to look at the pictures themselves. He faults a course in aesthetics at Columbia and the "new darling" in "Humanities" for promoting the same kind of art noneducation: "Columbia succeeds in remembering a list of names: that is all."

His tone in the passage about paintings shifts from sarcastic to admiring as he describes Breughel's *Wedding Dance*, retracing vividly the path of his own eye through the formal arrangement of the picture: "You start by seeing the dancers in a round in the foreground, their whole group is like a living organism: in a pyramidal arrangement." It is the form of the picture—the gaiety and life it conveys—that captivates him. He concludes that this is what attracted others to the work as well, "no matter what they said."⁶⁴ In discussing the Fra Angelico *Temptation of Saint Anthony*, he writes, "Looking at the picture is exactly the same thing as praying." Again it is the form of the picture that communicates and which he sees; the point at which the Saint's movement is captured is "still," evoking a sense of the eternal and of a kind of ineffable prayer.⁶⁵ Many years later, as he introduced the subject of art to them for the first time, Merton would emphasize to novices at Gethsemani that it was not as important "to have some kind of self-conscious knowledge of what art is about" as it was "to be able to respond to beauty in life." Reminiscent of his response to *Wedding Dance* and *Temptation of Saint Anthony* twenty-five years earlier, he opens the monks to considering art as an aspect of a broad orientation to life, rather than solely in terms of who or what.⁶⁶ He thus fortifies rather than simply embellishes the monastic curriculum; learning to see the beauty of life through art and understanding beauty as a matter ultimately of being, as he tells the novices, supports the development of a Christian if not contemplative view of the world.

63. Thomas Merton, "Brown Journal," November 26, 1940, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, New York.

64. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 51–55.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Thomas Merton, "Beauty and Art," 8-12-64, Tape #175 Side B, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky.

60. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 256.

61. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 139.

62. Interview with Marion Weis Horey.

Merton's account of his visit to the art exhibit includes not only his own detailed observations of different paintings, but also his commentary on the observations of others he overheard; he was concerned with how people were looking at and interpreting the art. He could not understand, nor could he condone, the empty exercise of looking for the painters' names, anymore than he could simply talk about literature. If Marion Weis Horey's description is indicative, then he chose to teach literature in part by entering into it and in this way, like Van Doren, to communicate it as it was meant to be, inviting his students to understand it and engage it likewise. For students like Robert Fenzl this approach worked.

Horey, Fenzl, Barnhurst, Ballard, and Crisman represent the students about whom Merton says little in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, those he does not rank with either the football players or the seminarians as among the "best elements" in his classes. If he has overlooked them in his account, then he has overlooked students who respected his knowledge, appreciated his European background, and who were attentive to, and grateful for, his teaching. They understood the challenge Merton had in teaching literature to a mixture of students, many of whom were not there by choice, and appreciated his patience in doing so. As James Magill puts it, "[He] handled us all quite well, both the football players and the scholars, and all thought him an OK guy."⁶⁷

Merton's teaching responsibility combined with his daily prayer, writing, and study to establish a discipline, order, and satisfaction in his daily life lacking before. But, as we know, he was stirred by a deeper spiritual longing. After a little more than a year at Bonaventure he agonizes that

teaching English is not enough—nor is writing novels in double-talk. Both of these are sidetracks, and this place is too remote from the places where people suffer most, and cry out in agony for some kind of help. Besides that, I imagine I can teach people here something that will turn them towards helping those others. But how can I? How do I know what I am talking about?⁶⁸

Here he is in the throes of deciding whether to go to Friendship House in Harlem to serve the poor. A month later he writes to Lax, "Harlem

isn't it, for me. Nor is any college. Nor is New York."⁶⁹ Within days, desiring to "belong entirely to God," he would leave his teaching notebooks behind—but not, as it turns out, his teaching career—as he made his way to Gethsemani.

67. James Magill to author, May 16, 1995.

68. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, 450.

69. Merton to Robert Lax, *The Road to Joy*, 163.