

Thomas Merton in Search of His Heart: The Autobiographical Impulse of Merton's Bonaventure Novels

by Paul M. Pearson

"I am still trying to find out: and that is why I write."

"How will you find out by writing?"

"I will keep putting things down until they become clear."

"And if they do not become clear?"

"I will have a hundred books, full of symbols, full of everything I ever knew or ever saw or ever thought."¹

These words of Thomas Merton, first published in 1969, provide a vital key to his enormous literary output. They point to his continual questioning and search for the truth, both his own personal truth, the truth of his life, as well as truth for the whole of humanity—two paths to truth Merton saw as inseparable. But that dialogue, published in 1969, was written at St. Bonaventure's in June 1941 and comes from Merton's autobiographical novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*. They are prophetic words for the rest of Merton's life and show the intensity of his self-awareness and his self-knowledge from the very earliest days of his writing career.

In the years following Merton's baptism, immediately prior to his entry into the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in December 1941, his literary output steadily increased; however, except for some book reviews and a few poems, little was published at that time. Merton spent the summer of 1939 and part of the summer of 1940 at Olean in

1. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1975) 52–53.

the cottage of Lax's brother-in-law, Benji Marcus, with Bob Lax and Ed Rice. The three friends spent the summer of 1939 writing novels, and Merton tells us his novel "grew longer and longer and longer and eventually it was about five hundred pages long, and was called first *Straits of Dover* and then *The Night Before the Battle*, and then *The Labyrinth*."² The following year Merton wrote *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, and in 1941, while teaching at St. Bonaventure's, he completed *My Argument with the Gestapo*. He tried without success to get *The Labyrinth*, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, and *My Argument with the Gestapo* published at that time. On his entry to Gethsemani he carefully preserved *My Argument with the Gestapo* and sent it to Mark Van Doren, but believed he destroyed the other novels. Merton was mistaken, however, and in recent years a fragment of both *The Straits of Dover* and *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* have come to light, as well as the greater part of *The Labyrinth*.³

Merton describes these works as novels, saying of *The Labyrinth* that it was partly autobiographical, covering some of the ground later covered by *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He also says he mixed up "a lot of imaginary characters"⁴ with his own story, a technique he also used in *My Argument with the Gestapo*. Naomi Burton Stone, to whom Merton submitted these novels, also remembers them as autobiographical, describing *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* as strongly autobiographical and *My Argument with the Gestapo* as containing "many scenes from his boyhood."⁵

The autobiographical novel is a definite literary form⁶ and has been used by numerous writers including Lawrence and Joyce, both of whom Merton was reading at this period of his life. In an autobiographical novel characters are frequently "put into situations which

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975) 240.

3. A near-complete copy of *The Labyrinth* was found, according to Michael Mott, in a folder with the erroneous title "Journal of My Escape from the Nazis" in pencil on the cover, and a number of pages from *The Straits of Dover* and *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* were found among papers Merton gave to Father Richard Fitzgerald at St. Bonaventure's before Merton left for Gethsemani. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986) 126–7.

4. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 241.

5. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 15.

6. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1960). See in particular ch. 11.

can be called extreme" and "in which the posited potentialities of the character have the utmost room to develop"⁷—one could think here of Merton's return to London and France in *My Argument with the Gestapo* as an illustration of this. The autobiographical novel allows the writer to discover something of their "infinite range," whereas autobiography proper "tends towards practical wisdom" recounting the way in which the author has "come to terms with reality" and found a way to "the realised self"⁸; it can reveal "in a person what in life may be hidden and only latent"⁹ and point to what the author "feels is his potential reality."¹⁰ A novel is "complete in itself while the autobiography always reaches forward"¹¹ to the writer. Finally, the literary form of the autobiographical novel is more suitable to a younger writer, since a younger one would be unlikely to have the perspective necessary to write what Pascal has called a "significant autobiography."¹²

The section of *The Straits of Dover* that has been found can hardly be described as an autobiographical novel—it is much more straightforward autobiography than novel. In it Merton describes Oakham and its surroundings and some elements of his life there. There are also a few pages describing his life at Cambridge, and he makes some references to his grandfather and Aunt Maud. Similarly *The Labyrinth*, which Merton points out in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is developed from *The Straits of Dover*,¹³ is largely autobiographical, although it contains three sections that would fit better into the classification of the novel.¹⁴ *The Labyrinth* begins with Merton returning to England from New York and goes on to describe life at Oakham, his visit to Cambridge to take the entrance exam, his European trip after his eighteenth birthday, including his visit to Rome, his first year at

7. *Ibid.*, 176.

8. *Ibid.*, 178.

9. *Ibid.*, 176.

10. *Ibid.*, 178.

11. *Ibid.*, 164.

12. *Ibid.*, 178.

13. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 240.

14. Thomas Merton, *The Labyrinth* [unpublished manuscript], Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky. (Merton's original page-numbering is missing from many pages, so page numbers referred to here are those added at some later point and run through the whole manuscript.) These novel sections are pp. 15–25 about Terence Park, pp. 98–106 describing Jato in Marseilles, and pp. 119–44 entitled "The Memoirs of a Prince of the Blood."

Cambridge and "the party in the middle of the night," his return to New York, and his early months back there. Mott has suggested Merton developed some sections from *The Labyrinth* in writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and in writing *The Sign of Jonas* in 1948 Merton describes *The Seven Storey Mountain* as "the book I couldn't make a go of ten years ago"¹⁵—obviously a reference to *The Labyrinth*.

Only the opening part of *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* has been preserved and, of all these unpublished works, this is the closest to an autobiographical novel. Naomi Burton Stone described it as "a wild and wonderful story, often extremely funny,"¹⁶ while at the same time acknowledging its "strong autobiographical streak." Unlike *The Straits of Dover* and *The Labyrinth*, Merton no longer speaks using the first person singular; instead, he very thinly disguises himself as one of the novel's characters—Jim Mariner. The character is obviously Merton: he writes stories and poems, is working on an M.A. on Blake, reads Gilson and Maritain, is melancholy, very pious, greatly troubled by the news from Europe, and is attracted to the priestly life.

My Argument with the Gestapo, written shortly after Merton's Easter visit to Gethsemani, is the only complete example of these novels and the only one to be published. Originally called *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, it frequently reads more like a journal than a novel.¹⁷ In addition to containing many scenes from Merton's boyhood, it also reflects his questioning and the dilemmas he was facing at the time he wrote it.¹⁸

15. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1953) 107. Merton makes a similar remark in a letter of October 1948 to Father Raymond Flanagan describing *The Seven Storey Mountain* as "definitely the book God has been wanting me to get off my chest all these years. I was already trying it ten years ago." Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 236.

16. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 13.

17. A point made by Anthony Padovano in his book *The Human Journey, Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books/A Division of Doubleday & Company, 1984) 10. In a letter of November 1941 to Mark Van Doren Merton himself calls it a journal saying "the book is confusing anyway, except as a journal, which is what it is." Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 12.

18. A number of drafts of *My Argument with the Gestapo* exist and the major difference between them and the version published in 1969 is that they contain two sections of material omitted from the published version. First, a section is omitted from p. 133 of the published version in which Merton discusses in further detail

Recalling *My Argument with the Gestapo* in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote of it that it was "the kind of book that I liked to write." He found it satisfying as "it fulfilled a kind of psychological necessity that had been pent up in me all through the last stages of the war because of my sense of identification, by guilt, with what was going on in England. . . . It was something I needed to write."¹⁹ Returning to look at the book in 1951, for the first time in ten years, Merton found it a "very inhibited book"²⁰ and suggested it gave a false solution to the question of his relationship with the world. But Merton was never able to abandon this book and occasionally raised the question of publishing it with his literary agent. In 1968 Merton describes *My Argument with the Gestapo* as "a book I am pleased with. . . . There is good writing and it comes from the center where I have really experienced myself and my life."²¹ He tells Naomi that "it reads well, just as well as it ever did."²² By the end of Merton's life he seemed keener on *My Argument* than he is on *The Seven Storey Mountain*, suggesting the author of the latter was dead not once, but many times²³—an attitude very different from his 1968 comments on *My Argument*. A possible reason for his attitude change could be that, in the end, *My Argument with the Gestapo* is truer to Merton than his best-selling autobiography. *My Argument* and these other novel fragments provide a balance, to some extent, to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, where Merton, in the early fervor

Charlie Chaplin films, which he describes as "big, important events of my life." He concluded the omitted section by saying, "A list of Charlie Chaplin's pictures and the places where I saw them is like the outline for the story of my life." (Merton's reference to the places where he saw these films in this quote is important as it points to the way in which an autobiography can be laid out by significant landmarks in the autobiographer's life, thus a possible structure for an autobiography is one that traces "the significant geography of a life." See Irwin J. Montaldo, "Toward the Only Real City in America: Paradise and Utopia in the Autobiography of Thomas Merton" [MA thesis, Emory University, 1974] 11.) Second, the unpublished version contains a couple of extra pages at the end in which Merton speaks to his completed book and sends it on its way. These two sections are to be found in a first typescript draft of *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis*, with undated author's corrections, held at the Merton Studies Center, and in a version contained in vol. 3 of Merton's *Collected Essays*, also held at the Studies Center.

19. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 336.

20. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 313.

21. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 513.

22. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 150.

23. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 320.

of his monastic life, presents both his life and the world in black and white terms. In Merton's pre-monastic novels he does not see things in such clear-cut terms but, as he says in *My Argument*, "I am all the time trying to answer both you and myself. I am all the time trying to make out the answer, as I go on living."²⁴ He is continuing to search for answers, unlike in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where he presents Gethsemani as the answer. In *My Argument* Merton was also struggling to "rediscover his own past in some meaningful continuity with his present circumstances,"²⁵ working through his own difficulties and doubts at a crucial time of decision for him so that his preoccupations in Europe are "those of the actual Merton at that time in America":²⁶

If you want to identify me, [if I want to identify myself] ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.²⁷

These are the very questions Merton was asking himself in the summer of 1941 after his first visit to Gethsemani.

In all four of these novels Merton explores his own inner truth, attempting to make sense of his story, and, in writing it for publication, attempting to make that story known to others. Over the course of Merton's early work from *The Straits of Dover* to *The Seven Storey Mountain* a sense of direction develops. Robert Giroux felt that *The Straits of Dover* "got nowhere"²⁸ and in *The Labyrinth* there is much rushing about but "no clear purpose to the rushing."²⁹ In *My Argument with the Gestapo* Padovano has suggested there is "paralysis at the heart of the novel despite the frenzy on the surface,"³⁰ but Merton is beginning to ask the right questions. In his unpublished ending to *My Argument*

24. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 161.

25. David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 281.

26. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978) 33.

27. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 160–1.

28. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 17.

29. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 126.

30. Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 13. In *The Sign of Jonas*, 313, Merton describes this problem with the book as follows: "A situation presents itself and the stream of the book—which after all has a stream—stops and forms a lake. It is sometimes quite a bright lake. But I can do nothing with it."

with the Gestapo Merton gives a definite impression that he is coming close to an answer as "we are girded with white chords, (being secret monks) that we may remember Ariadne's subtle string that solved the maze's mathematic."³¹ In *The Seven Storey Mountain* the impression Merton gives is that he has quite clearly found the answer he was searching for equating Gethsemani with the paradise of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. His epilogue, though, does sow further questions, and such questions will be more central to the remainder of Merton's life and work than any answers he may appear to have found in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This movement in Merton's life from his dissipated early life to the rigid order and narrowness of life in the monastery and then, in later years, returning to a much broader vision of himself and the world, but rooted in the relationship he developed with Christ in his early days at Gethsemani, is like the shape of an hourglass.³²

The picture of Merton that appears through his pre-monastic novels is fascinating and provides a balance to the picture presented in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Three aspects of that picture are worth examining in detail so as to illustrate both the intensity of Merton's self-awareness and his self-knowledge from the earliest days of his writing career, as well as the balance Merton's pre-monastic novels provide to his autobiography. First, the connections found between Merton's writing of this period and his later work; second, his own attitude toward his time in Europe, especially England and Cambridge; and, finally, returning to examine the autobiographical nature of these novels.

A Fine Consistency: Early Novels and Late Monastic Writings

Anthony Padovano wrote in *The Human Journey* that "one of the unexpected aspects of the life of Merton is his consistency."³³ He illus-

31. Merton, *Collected Essays*, 294–6.

32. David Mack Haynie, "Mysticism as the Basis for Religious Pluralism in the Thought of Thomas Merton" (Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977). Haynie describes Merton's spiritual pilgrimage as one of "unity emerging from diversity that developed in an hourglass shape. Merton moved downward in a spiraling motion through the diversities of his pre-monastic years to Gethsemani, where his unity with God in Christ was achieved. This movement in his life represented the center of the hourglass." From this unity "Merton's spiritual pilgrimage after 1951 became an outward and expanding spiraling motion into the other half of the hourglass as he sought to encompass and unify all things in and through himself in Christ by love," 55.

33. Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 14.

trated this comment by comparing *My Argument with the Gestapo* with *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, drawing attention to the many elements his early novel had in common with his final anti-poetry: they are all autobiographical, concerned with the decay of civilization, present the author on a journey on which he never finds a home, and illustrate his passion for non-violence.³⁴

The comparison Padovano makes can be extended. In Merton's unpublished novels there are many themes that will crop up consistently for the rest of his life: the importance of place and geography, feelings of exile, questions concerning nationality, the place of adverts, plague imagery and the use and misuse of language, along with the themes suggested by Padovano. An interesting example of this is Merton's use, for the very first time, of the phrase "something I had been looking for"³⁵ in *The Labyrinth*. This and similar phrases are phrases he would use a number of times in his life at major critical points, emphasizing the importance of the events he is relating.³⁶ William Shannon has described such phrases as "a Merton signature for moments of profound experience."³⁷

Another important element pointing to the consistency of Merton's life is his early attraction toward solitude. In *The Straits of Dover* Merton describes frequent times at Oakham where he spent time on his own,³⁸ describing how he would go to Brooke Hill and "walk, or sit, up there for hours, not waiting for anything or looking for anything or expecting anything, but simply looking out over the wide valley, and watching the changes of the light across the hills, and

34. Naomi Burton Stone in her introduction to *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 14, stressed this point and suggested Merton's novel expressed "his lifelong convictions about the futility of war and its brutalizing effects" on humanity.

35. On p. 52 of Merton's typescript of *The Labyrinth* he has added this phrase at some later stage by hand. The following page contains a similar phrase: "something that I was looking for."

36. The most well-known example of his use of this phrase is recorded in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* days before his death after his visit to the carved images of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa. In his journal for December 4, 1968, Merton writes, "I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for." Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton and others (London: Sheldon Press, 1974) 236.

37. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 278.

38. Thomas Merton, *The Straits of Dover* [unpublished manuscript], Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, 7, 14–16.

watching the changes of the sky,"³⁹ noting "I must have had the reputation of rather a solitary fellow."⁴⁰

Merton's Attitude toward Europe

In Merton's pre-Gethsemani novels his attitude toward Europe, especially England, is quite different from the picture he gives in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In his autobiography he associates his time in England with hell, with Cambridge being the lowest circle of the inferno and remaining for many years the one really bad place in Merton's geography. Gradually, especially in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton comes to terms with his time in Europe and begins to recall good times that had, in the black and white approach of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, been forgotten or ignored.

Merton's picture of his time in England is quite different in his novel fragments. In *My Argument with the Gestapo*, in an attempt to reconcile his past with his present circumstances in 1941, Merton returns to England and France. In 1940 Merton had written of his concern about the bombing of London, "where I once lived, where there are so many people that were my friends in school, and people that I loved."⁴¹ In *My Argument with the Gestapo* he returns to England for "the reasons Dante made his"⁴² journey, recognizing in far more compassionate terms than in *The Seven Storey Mountain* that "because you loved too much, in your childishness, the things the world adored, Christ's Crucifixion flowered in London."⁴³ In *My Argument with the Gestapo* Merton does not return to Cambridge, although he discusses it with a soldier who concludes, after Merton compares his memory of it to "the waiting rooms of dentists,"⁴⁴ that Merton "doesn't like Cambridge."⁴⁵

In writing about London in *My Argument with the Gestapo* Merton presents two views of it corresponding to Blake's poems of innocence

39. Ibid., 15.

40. Ibid., 16. This last phrase has been crossed out in the manuscript but is still legible.

41. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 165. Taken from an entry in Merton's St. Bonaventure Journal dated October 27, 1940.

42. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 137.

43. Ibid., 138.

44. Ibid., 107.

45. Ibid., 112.

and experience. One is "a city of angels"⁴⁶ and in the other "the masks fall off the houses, and the streets become liars and the squares become thieves and the buildings become murderers."⁴⁷ For Merton, "the first city vanished when I walked the streets of the second at night."⁴⁸ In *My Argument with the Gestapo* Merton's attitude toward Tom Bennett—Uncle Rafe as he is called in that novel—is quite different. Merton acknowledges some of his debt to Bennett by saying that if he made a list of the things he learned from Bennett it "would be very long"⁴⁹ and "only from my father did I learn what would make a longer list than that of the things I first heard of from Uncle Rafe."⁵⁰ Finally, he recalls a drunken attempt at apologizing for everything before he left London.⁵¹ Merton's attitude to the Bennetts here is more sympathetic than in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and more in line with a letter he wrote to Iris Bennett in 1966.⁵²

Although Merton avoided visiting Cambridge in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, he does not avoid it in *The Straits of Dover* and *The Labyrinth*. In *The Straits of Dover* he writes of his expectations of Cambridge as the place where "I was almost sure that I would find exactly what I wanted."⁵³ In *The Labyrinth* Merton expands on those expectations of what Cambridge meant:

. . . almost everything you expected from life. It meant finding out what everything meant, . . . wearing good clothes, . . . talking to interesting people, famous people; finding out about the things that a civilised person had to know: wines and foods and particular kinds of tobaccos. . . . I would drive cars, and row, and ride and hunt; I would write and dance and sing and paint; I would act, I would box and fence; I would go shooting, I would sail, . . . but most important of all I would also run into the queen of all women.⁵⁴

46. Ibid., 33.

47. Ibid., 34.

48. Ibid., 35.

49. Ibid., 143.

50. Ibid., 143–4.

51. Ibid., 148.

52. In Merton's letter to Iris Bennett in 1966 he spoke of "the immense debt I owed to Tom and which, all appearances to the contrary, I have never forgotten. And the debt I owe you, too." Merton, *The Road to Joy*, 77.

53. Merton, *The Straits of Dover*, 21.

54. Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 30.

Similarly, on his visit to Cambridge for the entrance exam, Merton describes himself and his friends as excited, awed, and happy.⁵⁵ References such as these are not to be found in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, with its use of the metaphor of hell to describe Merton's youth. The happier times, which certainly existed and which Merton would later in his life acknowledge,⁵⁶ have been overlooked.

The chapter of *The Labyrinth* entitled "The Party in the Middle of the Night"⁵⁷ is more negative about Merton's time at Cambridge, describing it as the nadir of his sun. However, the following spring Merton can still describe something of the beauty of Cambridge: "The grass sparkled with its own moisture, in the pale, stronger-growing sun. . . . I had always known Cambridge would look like this in the spring. It was very beautiful; everywhere was very beautiful in the spring." He adds—very mildly when compared to his dislike of Cambridge in *The Seven Storey Mountain*—"but here I still couldn't be sure I liked it."⁵⁸

In *The Labyrinth*, by the time Merton left England in the autumn, his view of Cambridge was that he "had not made peace" with it and "actively hated the place."⁵⁹ His other memories of England and France are quite different and a contrast to the equivalent passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁶⁰ Merton felt it was heartrending leaving "all the places I have ever most liked, the places I have grown up in." He writes of "places where I have been most happy" saying, "leaving

55. *Ibid.*, 32.

56. See, for example, Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968) 168–9.

57. Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 65.

58. *Ibid.*, 75.

59. *Ibid.*, 85.

60. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 128ff. There is a discrepancy between Merton's account of leaving England in his autobiography and in *The Labyrinth*. At the end of Merton's first year at Cambridge he went to America for the summer and sailed from Tilbury. When he left England for good in November 1934, he sailed from Southampton. In *The Labyrinth* Merton's description of England is centered around passing through the Straits of Dover after having sailed from Tilbury. This could suggest that his account of sailing from England in *The Labyrinth* is an account of his trip at the end of his first year at Cambridge, but a careful reading of the text reveals quite clearly that Merton sees this voyage as his "going away for good" from England with all his possessions, and that if he ever came back it would be "with a different passport and a new nationality" and as "a completely different person." Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 87.

it behind is like leaving behind my whole life"⁶¹ and, feeling tears in his eyes, Merton has to bite his lip to keep them back.⁶² As Merton leaves England in *The Labyrinth* his memories are closer to passages he would later write in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* than to his description of England in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, including in both *The Labyrinth* and *Conjectures* lists of places important to his personal geography.

A similar comparison can be made between Merton's accounts of his 1933 trip to Rome in *The Labyrinth* and *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In *The Labyrinth* he describes it as "the same good city," adding "I was very happy."⁶³ In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he says, "I was miserable."⁶⁴ The episode in *The Seven Storey Mountain* where Merton describes a vision of his dead father is described in *The Labyrinth* as despondency "because I was simply lonely . . . and had no one to talk to";⁶⁵ it makes no mention at all of his father.⁶⁶ Hawkins suggests that the anticlimax in Merton's narrative after his visit to Rome as recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain* indicates that "nothing whatsoever really happened to Merton in the Roman hotel room,"⁶⁷ which suggests that his account in *The Labyrinth* is possibly closer to his original experience.

Merton's attitude to his earlier life seen in his unpublished novels is more consistent with his later memories of that life as he grew to maturity at Gethsemani than with the account he gives in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. This difference does not undermine Merton's autobiography, as the truth expected from an autobiography is different from that expected from a biography, which is concerned with facts and the reconstruction of a life. The concern of an autobiography is not with the events recalled, but with the person those events have formed, "more

61. Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 84.

62. *Ibid.*, 86.

63. *Ibid.*, 48.

64. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 106.

65. Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 60.

66. William Shannon has suggested that in *The Seven Storey Mountain* the eighteen-year-old school boy is being judged with great severity by the thirty-one-year-old monk who is "projecting onto the younger man the moral lapses that would occur later that year at Clare College, Cambridge." Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 70.

67. Anne Olivia Hawkins, *Archetypes of Conversion: The Autobiographies of Augustine, Bunyan, and Merton* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1985) 145.

the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past."⁶⁸ Thus in *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton gives the reader his experience from the standpoint he has reached. When Merton distorts the truth the distortions can be "as revealing as the truth."⁶⁹ Thus Merton's presentation of his time in Europe in his autobiography serves to contrast his metaphor of hell, descriptive of his life at that stage, with his later metaphor of Gethsemani as paradise. By emphasizing his embrace of life at Gethsemani in opposition to the life he believed he had renounced and left behind, Merton clearly demonstrates the standpoint he has adopted. Likewise his account of the vision of his father in Rome adds to the story of his conversion and the important place he attributed to his father in both his life and his conversion.

Essentially Autobiography

Merton's pre-Gethsemani novels are all, to varying degrees, autobiographical and, as with Merton's autobiography and the journals he prepared for publication, their titles are metaphors for the experience he is describing in them. *The Straits of Dover*, also a title for a chapter of *The Labyrinth*, refers to a point that was the central crossroads for Merton up until 1934—a geographical and psychological juncture.⁷⁰ *The Labyrinth* is descriptive of the mixed up nature of Merton's life, "a maze with no way out for either author or reader."⁷¹ Its title suggests a very different understanding of his life than the one he had when he wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*. *The Labyrinth* suggests that his view of his life when he wrote that book was of a rather confusing maze, a contrast to the metaphor of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as James McNerney has remarked: "Where 'Labyrinth' conveys a futile meandering, the other evokes Dante's ascent to Paradise. It is a journey with a destination."⁷²

68. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, 11.

69. *Ibid.*, 62.

70. In writing of the Straits of Dover as a crossroads "between all the places I have lived in" Merton goes on to add, in a section that has been crossed out but is still legible, that there were only two important places in his life not reached by this crossroad—New York and Bermuda, recalling Bermuda as an important place in his life without any mention of its importance to him. Merton, *The Labyrinth*, 84.

71. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 126.

72. James R. McNerney, "Merton and the Desert Experience," *Review for Religious* 43 (1984) 601.

The title of *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* refers to the gospel account of Zacchaeus,⁷³ the tax-collector, who climbed up into a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus more clearly. Merton's title here reflects his own growing determination to follow the will of God for him and to turn away, like Zacchaeus, from his sins. The name of the character who is obviously Merton is also relevant—Mariner, a name that picks up on Merton's interest in the sea and travel and, more specifically now, his journey to God. In one of Merton's early Gethsemani poems, "The Landfall," a poem describing his discovery of Gethsemani in terms of a voyage, Merton uses the name Mariner saying:

O Mariner, what is the name of this uncharted Land?
On these clean shores shall stand what sinless voyager,
What angel breathe the music of this atmosphere?⁷⁴

Merton's use of a capital M in Mariner implies he is using the word as a proper noun, as opposed to using it to simply describe a seaman.

Merton's autobiographical purpose in *My Argument with the Gestapo*—a book that Mott has suggested should be renamed *My Argument with England*, as the Gestapo are incidental to the story—can be seen both in Merton's title for the book as well as in the quote from Donne that he uses as an epigraph for the book:

I sacrifice this Iland unto thee,
And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd mee;
When I have put our seas twixt them and mee
Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee.⁷⁵

A fitting epigraph as Merton attempted to reconcile himself with his time in England and France, but not with his sins—a reconciliation not evident in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but which would surface in Merton's later autobiographical works.

My Argument with the Gestapo, along with the fragments that remain of Merton's other pre-Gethsemani novels, contains varying amounts of autobiographical material and indicates the centrality of

73. Luke 19:1-10.

74. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978) 190.

75. John Donne, "A Hymne to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany," *The Divine Poems*, ed. John Hayward (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973) 175. Used by Merton as an epigraph to *My Argument with the Gestapo*.

autobiography to Merton's work. His concern with telling the story of his life was not a one-off concern in obedience to his abbot⁷⁶ but, as his later works show—especially his journals and poetry, and in fact all his works—it is a key to Thomas Merton, especially to Merton as a writer. Merton's pre-Gethsemani novels very clearly show us this autobiographical impulse present in his writings prior to his entry into Gethsemani. The recent discovery of a number of items of juvenilia by Doctor Robert Daggy and myself, which date from 1929–1931 and contain some highly autobiographical sections in the form of a novel, show an even earlier manifestation of Merton's autobiographical impulse.⁷⁷

76. Although Merton claimed his work was written in obedience to his abbot, Chrysogonus Waddell has pointed out that Merton very early on "took the initiative in choosing his subject matter" which was then "immediately confirmed by the sympathetic Abbot." Chrysogonus Waddell, "Merton and the Tiger Lily," *The Merton Annual*, vol. 2 (New York: AMS Press, 1989) 59–84. In support of this Waddell has quoted in full an important memorandum Merton gave to Dom Frederic in 1946, intended for the Order's General Chapter. In it Merton outlines various books he was hoping to write in the coming years, including the suggestion of a biography of a Gethsemani monk, who was obviously, from the brief description Merton gives, himself. Merton describes his proposal of a biography as "the biography or rather history of the conversion and the Cistercian vocation of a monk of Gethsemani. Born in Europe the son of an artist, this monk passed through the abyss of Communism in the university life of our times before being led to the cloister by the merciful grace of Jesus," 84.

77. These manuscripts were discovered in the possession of Frank Merton Trier, a first cousin of Merton with whom he spent some of his school holidays up until the summer of 1930 when it was decided he would spend his future holidays with his godfather, Tom Bennett. These manuscripts were discovered on December 13, 1993, by Dr. Robert E. Daggy and the present writer. The style of the author's handwriting and the content of the stories, along with Mr. Trier's testimony, verified the authenticity of these manuscripts. Currently these manuscripts remain in the possession of Mr. Trier with photocopies held on file at the Merton Center at Bellarmine College.

One of these manuscripts, *The Haunted Castle*, obviously imitating the Winnie the Pooh stories, is "profusely illustrated in pen and ink" (Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 52). This is the earliest of these manuscripts and dates back to Merton's Christmas holiday in 1929, which he spent with relatives at Western Cottage, Windsor. See Thomas Merton, "The Haunted Castle," *The Merton Seasonal* 19 (winter 1994) 7–10. Another manuscript, *Ravenswell*, an adventure story filling an exercise book of 158 pages, was written in just twelve days. Another fragment of a story in this collection, *The Black Sheep*, is about life at Oakham. It has a distinctly autobiographical flavor to it, making it difficult to believe that the boy Merton is

In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton had written, "Every book I write is a mirror of my own character and conscience,"⁷⁸ a statement that applied to 1949 when he wrote it but which could also be applied anachronistically to much earlier writings and prophetically to much later writings. The whole story of Merton's life was one of a "movement from experience to the inner word and from the inner word"⁷⁹ to its expression in the written word. Merton, as William Shannon has pointed out, "was so deeply preoccupied with what was going on in his own heart that he could not write about anything else,"⁸⁰ so that by the time of his death he was still "putting things down until they became clear," filling many books with "everything [he] ever knew or ever saw or ever thought."⁸¹

describing in the story is anyone other than himself. The story contains detailed descriptions of Oakham and life at the school based on Merton's own experience.

78. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, 160.

79. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 41.

80. *Ibid.*, 19.

81. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, 53.