

## Merton's Ethos in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: Toward a Rhetoric of Conversion

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As extensive and diverse as Merton's writings were, his literary reputation will rest on the sequence of edited journals including *The Sign of Jonas*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and the posthumously published *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* and *A Vow of Conversation*, among others.<sup>1</sup> In the journals we see Merton's full strength as a writer. As I argued in 'Out of the Shadows: Merton's Rhetoric of Revelation',<sup>2</sup> we need only examine a few entries in the journals that served as the source for the masterful essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' to witness Merton move from closely observing nature to produce a prose poem, to analyzing and interpreting obscure sacred texts and a popular secular drama to shed light on a contemporary social problem, to composing powerful prayers that stand as modern rivals to the ancient psalms he believed to be 'bread in the wilderness' nourishing the monk through spiritual conflict and questioning. Merton's journal work played a key role in his development as a person and as a writer, and his journals served as source material for much of his published work. Here I will concentrate on the premonastic journals presented in *Run to the Mountain*, edited by Patrick Hart,<sup>3</sup> and their relation to *The Seven Storey Mountain*.<sup>4</sup> I will use classical rhetorical

1. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953); *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. Naomi Burton, James Laughlin and Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1973); *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-65* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).

2. *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996), pp. 55-73.

3. *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

4. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948).

theory, the concept of ethos, in particular, to frame my analysis.

What do we know about Merton's journal practice? In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott describes Merton's habit of keeping a contemporaneous handwritten diary in stitch-bound composition books, as well as recording reading notes and other occasional notes in spiral-bound notebooks.<sup>5</sup> Knowing the kinds of books Merton used for journal writing allows Mott to identify where pages have been removed from the stitch-bound journals. Pages can be removed from spiral notebooks without leaving evidence. In various places, Merton himself mentions that he frequently reread the journals and would rip pages out, in a sense 'purging' them.

So the journals that survive are not complete records of Merton's everyday life. They contain only a limited number of autobiographical details. They are not rich sources for gossip or speculation. Whatever controversial materials remain in the journals are included very much with Merton's knowledge and permission. Mott also describes how, in the early years, Merton would rework the handwritten journals and notes into typewritten journals. Once typed up, the handwritten notes would be destroyed.

Merton had already reworked the handwritten journals from the period covered by *Run to the Mountain* for publication. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* was published in 1959 after some internal Cistercian controversy as *The Secular Journal*.<sup>6</sup> Analyzing *The Secular Journal* in the light of *Run to the Mountain* indicates that although Merton organized the three sections of the journal a bit differently, he mostly excerpted sections of the journals without extensive rewriting or editing. Patrick Hart's contribution, then, in *Run to the Mountain*, is providing us complete and unrestricted access to the 'composed' journals from the premonastic period. Until the publication of *Run to the Mountain*, only Mott as 'official' biographer had had access to the journals, and anyone who has read Mott's biography knows how extensively he used them. Now all Merton readers can examine at first hand the raw material of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In *Run to the Mountain* we glimpse a Merton who often stands in conflict with the formal and public Merton who, by writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, elected to place himself in the great literary tradition of the spiritual autobiography, with St Paul, Thomas à Kempis and Augustine,

5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 160.

6. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1959).

among others, serving as his mentors.

This conflict between the Merton of the journal and the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* is best understood by recognizing Merton's different rhetorical purposes in these two situations. Any instance in which a writer or speaker attempts to influence others to reconsider attitudes or act in a certain way is a rhetorical situation. The self presented in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is not Merton's 'true' or 'authentic' self. It is a 'composed' self Merton fabricates to further his purpose. From one perspective, *The Seven Storey Mountain* functions as a 'rhetoric' of conversion—a handbook or systematic model that others could follow. The rhetoric is embedded in an *apologia* that rationalizes his conversion to Catholicism and subsequent rejection of the secular world for the cloister. If successful, he will convince his audience to follow his example. Not everyone should enter the cloister, though *The Seven Storey Mountain* did seem to have a positive impact on monastic vocations. But everyone should understand the secular world's corruption and adopt Catholic attitudes and social practices to cope with and possibly reform the world.

Understanding the different contexts that created first the journals and later the autobiography helps us understand differences between the texts. Merton's job is carefully to select and construct materials originally recorded in the journals that will help him marshal evidence and create an argument, in the process accomplishing his rhetorical task. His task in *The Seven Storey Mountain* is, in fact, the opposite of his task in the journals where his purpose is exploring his experience and discovering themes and directions.

This is not to say that revising the journal materials—'re-visioning' the self—is an act of deception; rather, it reflects the struggle Merton himself experienced through his conversion. The constructed Merton represents the *ethos* of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. *Ethos*, as Roger Cherry argues in 'Ethos Versus Persona: Self Representation in Written Discourse',<sup>7</sup> is the rhetorical term for the constructed self that serves an argumentative purpose in any rhetorical situation. Writing *The Seven Storey Mountain* is a rhetorical situation.

In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle analyzes three appeals that combine to make any argument successful. *Logos* uses formal logic and evidence to appeal to reason. *Pathos* inspires pity or fear in an audience, moving them to change an opinion or to act in a particular way because of the frightening consequences of not changing attitudes or not acting.

7. Roger Cherry, 'Ethos Versus Persona: Self-Representation in Written Discourse', *Written Communication* 5.3 (July 1988), pp. 251-76 (272).

*Ethos*, the third appeal, is for Aristotle the most important because it has the most potential. *Ethos* combines *phronesis* (practical wisdom or good sense), *arete* (good moral character) and *eunoia* (good will toward an audience),<sup>8</sup> to create an image of the writer as intelligent, worthy of belief and an apt model for acting in the world. Merton's challenge in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, then, is creating a credible, authoritative *ethos* that elicits empathy and trust in his readers and convinces them ultimately to begin their own journey of conversion. Though logic and emotion are both used in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, given the religious and values-based themes that predominate, *ethos* holds the most potential for Merton. Given this challenge, Merton carefully and consciously shapes and reshapes journal materials to create an *ethos* that will accomplish his rhetorical purpose.

My claim that Merton used the journals as source materials when writing *The Seven Storey Mountain* is at least controversial. Some believe it is inaccurate. The dispute hinges on whether Merton had access to the journals while he was writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Mott reviews Merton's disposition of his worldly goods before entering Gethsemani. He refers to Merton's reordering of his life and his purging and distributing written materials at this time in stark terms: '[H]e began at once to burn his bridges and his books'.<sup>9</sup> Mott notes that Merton reviewed both handwritten materials and the already reworked typewritten journals, destroyed a considerable amount of material, and conveyed those materials he did not destroy to the safe hands of Mark Van Doren or Catherine de Hueck. Mott catalogs what Merton did bring to Gethsemani: 'Merton packed a small suitcase with a few clothes, his Vulgate, his breviary, *Imitation of Christ*, his Hopkins, his Blake and two half-filled notebooks'.<sup>10</sup> We know the half-filled notebooks did not include the journals because they had already been distributed to Van Doren and de Hueck. Thus it would seem impossible for Merton to have used the journals as source materials.

I would argue, however, that Merton's close review of the journals previous to leaving for Gethsemani made them so immediate and familiar to him that he had access even though he may not have had the journals themselves. Consider also that even before the final review, destruction and dissemination of materials, Merton had already worked and reworked handwritten notes into the typewritten

8. Cherry, 'Ethos Versus Persona', p. 272.

9. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 200.

10. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 201.

journals. Such extensive processing of the materials burned them into his memory. This view is reinforced by uncanny resemblances between materials in the journals and sentences, even whole sections, that appear in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Compare, for example, the epiphany Merton experiences in the Church of St Francis in Havana as it is recorded in *The Secular Journal*<sup>11</sup> and then retold in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.<sup>12</sup> Narrative, theme, language and metaphor—the ‘thunderclap’—are closely shared between the two accounts. The similarities are clear enough to legitimize my claim of a source relationship between the two, even if Merton did not have direct access to the journals. Consider also that when Mott describes the writing of *The Seven Storey Mountain* he notes that Merton had actually sent to St Bonaventure’s for materials—journals, letters and notebooks—in order to check the accuracy of his memory.<sup>13</sup> So it seems an open question as to whether Merton had direct access to the journal materials. All this rationalizes my claim of a source relationship between the premonastic journals and *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Now we can turn to the journals themselves. A good deal of Merton’s work goes to deselecting material or tempering social and political criticism. Social justice is a regular theme in the early journals. Often Merton is brutally critical of America and American Catholics. For example, the entry for Good Friday, 1940, begins with quotes from Matthew 26 and Isaiah—‘He hath poured out His soul in death’ (Isa. 53.12)—and a reference to the disciples’ complaint—Merton attributes the complaint specifically to Judas—that the perfume the woman pours over Jesus’ head was ‘wasted’ and should have been sold with the proceeds given to the poor (Mt. 26.6-13). Merton does not include the rest of the scene where Jesus announces that the poor will be present always and defends the woman’s act as charity offered to a condemned man, but he does begin a long entry on Catholic attitudes toward race, the poor and social justice. At times, the entry reads like a curse.

Let the people, the so-called Catholics who argue against the ‘imprudence’ of certain actions—like, for example, admitting a Negro child to parochial school for fear all the white parents take away their children—remember the ‘prudence’ of Judas and freeze with horror!<sup>14</sup>

11. Merton, *The Secular Journal*, pp. 76-77.

12. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 284-85.

13. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 227.

14. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 155.

He complains about the Pharisees’ use of charity to maintain the economic status quo, keeping people poor rather than providing relief. But he does not use images from the scripture. Rather he shifts to his own experience with professional charity.

The Pharisees had a system all worked out, and a lot of special prayers for every penny given away. It was a very efficient system, almost like some modern ‘charity’ with a huge filing system and a big sucker list of names and a lot of little dames with glasses on hopping around in an office like birds, and a lot more dames like mice, scratching at the doors of the poor with notebooks, and asking them their grandfather’s birth-place, and do the children have the rickets or tuberculosis, or how much money do the kids make between them shining shoes and selling papers?

The Pharisees knew how to take care of the poor in such a way that the poor would always be with them.<sup>15</sup>

Consider another example of strong social criticism, steeped in loathing for American cultural practices. Merton excoriates Cuba for its poverty and political corruption. However, his greater criticism redounds on an America that provides the capitalistic economic model and the corporate colonizers that undergird the corrupt Cuban system. In a religious context, Merton finds the Cuban people flawed but at least capable of love, love that is not possible in America, given its economics. His comments on Mother’s Day in Cuba are telling:

I suppose Cuba is too poor for a false feast like Mother’s Day to be much of a commercial success, and for that very reason Mother’s Day has actually caught on in Cuba. It is something of a genuine feast and is certainly a religious one. It got mentioned from the pulpit, and you could see that it really meant something to everybody, too. Mother’s Day is really a success in Cuba, a success which it can never hope to be in America, precisely because in Cuba it is useless to try to make it into a big advertising gag for candy and small presents, as nearly everybody cannot afford that sort of thing...

So you see everybody walking around loving their mothers: while in America the sale of candy and the amount of talk about loving one’s mother is out of all proportion to the actual love that is shared between mothers and their children. On top of that comes this great commercial insult, and so many other things of the same kind, that anyone with a grain of sensibility or decent feeling begins to wonder whether the love of one’s mother is not a false and shameful thing if it lends itself, without any protest, to the exploitation of charlatans. One immediately wonders why, if Americans do love their mothers, they should tolerate for an instant that that love should be made a great buffoonery, and Mother’s Day is so cynically exploited in America that it is a perfect

15. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, pp. 155-56.

scandal: it makes people who really do love their mothers almost ashamed of that love on Mother's Day if they happen to be sensitive to charlatanry at all... And probably if the truth is known they really do love their mothers in Cuba, and that is why Mother's Day is a commercial failure there, but at the same time a great moral success.<sup>16</sup>

Such direct social commentary appears frequently throughout the journal but not in the autobiography. While this commentary foreshadows the political activism of Merton's late career and is thus quite interesting, it stands in direct contrast to the otherworldly pietism that he seeks and achieves through his pilgrimages to the holy places in Cuba, especially to Our Lady of Cobre. In both substance and tone he cannot include such material in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He excludes this material, and significant amounts of similar material, to accommodate and avoid alienating those who will constitute the vast majority of his audience—Americans and American Catholics. These changes demonstrate Merton's awareness of *eunoia*, the ability to create a sense of goodwill toward an audience, and his understanding of the importance of *ethos* in constructing an argument. Merton's use of *ethos* exemplifies his considerable rhetorical skill.

In addition to providing specific examples of Merton's use of source materials when writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *Run to the Mountain* provides considerable insight about the development of Merton's aesthetic and moral imagination. *Run to the Mountain* contains the three surviving 'premonastic' journals. 'Perry Street, New York' spans May 1939 through February 1940 when Merton is living in Greenwich Village, teaching at the Columbia University Extension, and working hard at his then current 'vocation', becoming a writer of the caliber of Shakespeare, Joyce and Hopkins, among others he had studied while earning his BA and MA in literature at Columbia. This part of the journal includes reading notes with observations on literary history and style; social and political commentary that is often ironic and highly critical of American culture, especially middle-class American Catholic attitudes towards race, poverty and social justice; and a great deal of therapeutic analysis, both social and psychological, of Merton's life. Most of this highly confirmatory personal analysis is filtered through a lens colored by his conversion to Catholicism in November of 1938.

'Cuban Interlude' spans February 1940 through May 1940. This part of the journal, as presented by Hart following Merton's original

delineations, includes several Perry Street entries dealing with preparations for the journey to Cuba. After his arrival in Cuba, the journal contains critiques of religious art and architecture, as well as critical reviews of several theatrical entertainments; extensive descriptions of his bus trips across the island, accounts of meetings with various Cubans on those journeys embedded with social and political commentaries. He discusses at length T. Phillip Terry's guidebook, a travel book describing Cuba for Americans. He criticizes its transparent racism. In contrast, he portrays Cuban cultural activities, such as the 'paseo' around each town's plaza each night, as 'proper', and authentic social rituals that humanize the Cuban people. He contrasts such rituals with the American cultural habit of sentimentalizing or commercializing any authentic social experience.

Merton's understanding of the power of ethos and the need for *eunoia* guide him as he omits journal materials that are highly critical of America and American Catholics to concentrate on certain devotional themes. As a consequence, the Cuba materials included in *The Seven Storey Mountain* misrepresent Merton's actual experience during the journey.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the Cuba trip is presented as a 'pilgrimage' to the important churches on the island, particularly those dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This version of the journey presents a Merton who is seeking a 'vision' to confirm his belief that he has a vocation to the priesthood. It culminates in a transcendent experience of faith and innocence, inspired as he witnesses Cuban children sing the Creed during Sunday Mass at the Church of St Francis in Havana on 29 April. He describes his sense of this experience metaphorically, as a 'light' that

was purified of all emotion and cleansed of everything that savored of sensible yearnings. It was love as clean and direct as vision: and it flew straight to the possession of the Truth it loved.

And the first articulate thought that came to my mind was: 'Heaven is right here in front of me: Heaven, Heaven!'

It lasted only a moment: but it left a breathless joy and a clean peace and happiness that stayed for hours, and it was something I have never forgotten.<sup>17</sup>

This section of *The Seven Storey Mountain* ends with a paragraph of abstract theological speculation about the 'ordinary' nature of faith and experience and a paragraph evaluating how this experience and his entire Cuban journey fit into his unfolding conviction that he has a

16. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 214.

17. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 285.

religious vocation. More than 75 pages of journal materials are reduced to eight pages in the autobiography. The journal section contains another month of experiences, with several entries dealing with his concern with the war in Europe as well as other controversial political issues.

'Saint Bonaventure's, New York', spanning June 1940 through December 1941 details Merton's work as a junior instructor in English at Franciscan-operated St Bonaventure College in Olean, New York. He offers severe judgments of various students and their intellectual limitations, creating an image of Merton as the stereotypical arrogant English instructor ever prepared to wax eloquent on the meaning of *Gawain and the Green Knight* but ill-prepared to teach composition to average students.

Most of this section of the journal, however, concentrates on Merton's growing conviction that he has a religious vocation. He is very conflicted over this vocation, however, and debates the various forms it might take. He considers giving up everything to work in the lay apostolate at Catherine de Hueck's Friendship House in Harlem. He makes comments about heroic and saintly pastoral work by secular priests in urban areas. He applies to but is ultimately rejected by the Franciscans. He visits monasteries and considers living as a cloistered Trappist monk at Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky. This segment of the journal also contains social and political commentary concerning the war in Europe and documents Merton's progression, based on his interpretation of Christian teaching, from a Francofile and British partisan to a non-combatant conscientious objector and ultimately a complete pacifist. This section ends five days prior to his joining Gethsemani as a Trappist postulant.

But the St Bonaventure journal entries are different in kind from the others. By the end of this section of the journal, Merton has rejected the modern, socially engaged, urbane, often ironic style of his Columbia period and has mastered the Augustine-influenced high confessional style that dominates *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In addition, he adopts and perfects the devotional and pietistic stance of Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, a book he had been exploring since his early Columbia days but which becomes his primary inspiration as he is preparing himself for his monastic journey. By the end of *Run to the Mountain*, we see a Merton who has trained and 'formed' himself both aesthetically and morally through the scriptural, literary and rhetorical sources that predominate in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

So, finally, what do we learn by comparing the journals with the

autobiography? In the journals we see conflicting 'selves' ultimately resolve themselves into a conflicted self. This is characteristic of the best use of journals for personal development. Journals are polyvocal; they reflect the voices of the several selves that constitute an aware person struggling toward knowledge and wisdom in a complicated world. The purpose of the journal is to engage those selves in dialogs and debates, so the journal writer, in this case Merton, can explore, test and confirm his beliefs in the private and uncontested space offered by the journal. In this space, we see Merton engage conflicting elements of his existing aesthetic and moral belief system, based in secular experience and formed through his high culture education at Cambridge and Columbia, and dismiss or harmonize them with the belief system he is evolving through the conversion to Catholicism and his entry into monastic life. Considering this we understand why Merton excluded most of the political and social commentary that appeared in the journals.

And what do we learn about the broad path of Merton's career as writer and monk? Social and political commentary, such as the Judas curse and the Mother's Day critique, appears throughout the early journals, in a sense forecasting the political activism of Merton's late career. But social engagement stands in direct contrast to the other-worldly pietism that he seeks through his pilgrimages to the holy places in Cuba, that he seems to secure when he enters Gethsemani, and which he portrays eloquently in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In retrospect, the multifaceted nature of Merton's self, clearly at work in his journals, is greatly reduced as he reworks his premonastic experiences for inclusion in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

In sum, the early journals contain the whole of Merton, both stylistically and thematically, but in a microcosm. This observation has several implications. First, it provides us with considerable insight into Merton, especially that he was much more conflicted and therefore a more interesting character while he is working through his conversion than he presents himself to be in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Secondly, it anticipates many of the themes and controversies of Merton's career. In the early stage of his monastic career, he is working under the traditional sense of one of his vows, 'conversion'. Conversion entails an intense and continuous commitment by the monk to perfect his life as it is formed in the image of the religious order in a cloistered house. Later Merton reinterprets the vow as 'conversation', a term central to his later journal work and well represented in the edited journal, *A Vow of Conversation*. In this context, the change represents Merton's assertion of his need for autonomy, where the

end is not a preordained set of behaviors derived from *exempla* or formation through spiritual direction, but one derived from dialogs, debates and 'conversations' among facets of the self, the work Merton accomplishes in his journals. The latter requires the individual to work through conflict and ambiguity rather than accept a dogmatically or hierarchically imposed solution to a problem. So the tensions of the premonastic secular journals do not disappear. They are submerged in pietism only to resurface later in the struggle toward autonomy that Merton risks so much to attain and exercises so vigorously in his struggle to liberate himself from Gethsemani's monastic community to become a hermit and, contemporaneously, in his late political commentaries on racism, social justice and the Vietnam War.