

## 'Non-Public' Writing in Journal and Correspondence: A Core Radiating Outward. 1997 Bibliographic Review

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### I

Four years ago in the 1994 annual bibliographical review essay, I suggested that the five volumes of selected letters were a goldmine that would remain exceedingly difficult for scholars to interpret since such a vast quantity of related primary material must be assimilated in relation to the correspondence. At that time the fifth volume of selected letters, under the general editorship of William H. Shannon, had just been published and my concern was that while the selected letters (and others remaining in manuscript) are a superb indicator of Merton's diverse interests, thousands of letters exist, and many are not in Shannon's selected edition. Further, Merton crafted hundreds and hundreds of additional items, often simultaneously. His sustained journal is a perfect example of this process, and therefore we are now beginning to realize that many of the journal entries might well be considered distinct and separate items, sometimes almost like letters or poems. Thus, we are beginning to realize that the journals, in a different and systematic way, are another vast source to be mined, and we suspect Merton planned much of this. In the interview with Father Chrysogonus Waddell, one of Merton's fellow monks, edited for this volume of *The Merton Annual*, we are reminded that Merton did, apparently, find himself thinking *everything* he wrote was worthy of preservation.

We sense that with each letter and journal entry, and especially those of his last years, Merton must have known that he was always writing for posterity. Yet it is hard to keep track of all this. In William Shannon's recent book, *'Something of a Rebel': Thomas Merton, his Life*

and Works. An Introduction, analyzed later in this essay, the need for a concordance of Merton's published work is stressed so that proper connections can be traced.<sup>1</sup> In this bibliographical analysis I want to make some of these connections and speculate about the nature of Merton's 'non-public' work which nevertheless, I think, was frequently composed, with future readers in mind.

The rapid accumulation of the six volumes of complete journals which have been published just during the past three years makes the need for a concordance ever more apparent. There is simply now so much published—poems, letters, journals, essays—that we cannot easily absorb it. Unpublished materials including the scores of working notebooks, the orientation (or lecture) notes, and the hundreds of hours of taped lectures waiting to be transcribed are key primary materials which will also eventually have to be tracked if we are going to understand how Merton's writings are interrelated. Certainly all his writing was connected in the mind of this monk-writer, a private-public performer, whose core concerns remained with the 'hidden ground of love'.<sup>2</sup> Nearest the hidden center was his careful non-public writing.

1997 provided two major new sources of such primary Merton writing. These three books are additional proof of the need for a concordance, yet even without such a tool the patterns of this ambitious writer are revealed in these books. First, we have two more volumes of the complete journal, *Dancing in the Water of Life* and *Learning to Love*. They chronicle the years from mid-1963 into 1967, feverish years for Merton.<sup>3</sup> With so much new journal we have sufficient material to speculate about how these 'raw' entries have significant value in relation to the sustained monastic and literary career. Second, and as corroboration of the fact that Merton's prolific pen generated an enormous amount of material which possesses elaborate interconnections, we have a good new edition of many more selected letters.<sup>4</sup> This new book is a representative exchange culled from a quarter century of correspondence with one of his publishers, James Laughlin, of New Directions. Again it should be noted that the editor, David C.

1. Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997.

2. The first volume of Shannon's selected letters uses this key phrase for its title.

3. *Dancing in the Water of Life* (Journals; ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: HarperCollins, 1997); and *Learning to Love* (Journals; ed. Christine M. Bochen; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

4. *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (ed. David D. Cooper; New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

Cooper, had to choose a limited number of letters from those available so we are getting only a part of the total picture. These letters reveal an ambitious side of a (sometimes manipulative) and always earnest Merton. Similar letters surely exist to other editors, such as Robert Giroux, and to Merton's literary agent. Much remains to be found, published and interpreted.

Merton was no doubt intent on keeping a good clean record of his spiritual journey, but in these most recently released journals, and in the letters to Laughlin, we have startling evidence of a person always and simultaneously a devout private figure, but also, if not a performer, someone more and more aware of the total development of his life and work—a writer aware of inevitable reading public who would eventually see much of his vast output in print even if initially written for private purposes.

As the editor of Volume 4 of the journals, *Turning Toward the World* (1960–63), and as the fascinated reader of these two successive volumes of the journals which take us almost to the year of his death, it becomes clear to me that Merton, the keeper of a private journal, wrote simultaneously as a private recorder of selected events about his spiritual life *and* as an artist fully aware of the need to sort out private issues along with concerns about his public responsibilities, *yet* paradoxically for a public which would read him decades hence. All this is revealed throughout his enormous journal project and will have eventually to be interpreted in relation to correspondence, projects, poems in process, and so on. These not so 'raw' journal entries document Merton's sorting out process, while they also take on a unity which he realizes he both can yet paradoxically should not control because the journal is itself an unfolding process, and one qualified by his interior willfulness and by a reaching out toward the world in this journal. This happens in the correspondence too.

I want to focus on this insight to examine parts of the now available complete journals and to speculate about Merton's prophetic awareness about his complex writing life, especially as reflected in these two newest journals. In my opinion, Merton's journal project was increasingly working on two, and often even three levels: first, he is primarily concerned about his spiritual development; but, secondly, he is aware what he writes will be read and digested by others later; and, lastly, he often addresses the fact that he needs to be faithful to facts he might even want to omit. Therefore, while entries are always exceedingly private, as a literary performance they are so not so much as a retrospective record, but rather as the selections of someone peering years into the future and anticipating readers of this project, a

literary process which to some degree is taking on a life of its own; yet still it is one controlled by Merton. His journal, therefore, privately records the past while it anticipates future readers who may be able to learn from Merton's experiences. He seems to be in the process of revealing aspects of his life (which perhaps he might wish to shield) for the benefit of the journal project. This faithfulness, or honesty, is what I designate the third level. Perhaps this pattern which I suspected before I read Volume 6, *Learning to Love*, is most evident there reflecting the sometimes frantic two years of 1966 and 1967. But as Merton's productivity in all kinds of writing sped up during his prolific final years, my suspicion is that every single item produced (and he knew an archive was waiting) was simultaneously honest, earnest, private, while also strangely destined for the public.

## II

Throughout the journals there are many references to the nature of keeping a journal, and quite significant is an entry already written in July 1956, which reveals Merton's insight into what is occurring when he began again to keep a journal after a lapse of three full years:

I have always wanted to write about everything. That does not mean a book that *covers* everything—which would be impossible, but a book in which everything can go. A book with a little of everything that creates itself out of everything. That has its own life. A faithful book. I no longer look at it as a 'book'.<sup>5</sup>

Already at this relatively early moment Merton was becoming aware of the complexity of the process of journal fabrication and its relationship to readers who would come years later as his public life, literary reputation and its connections developed. Analysis of this complex awareness of interrelationships helps us see the complexity of Merton's accomplishments as he must have watched the journal develop as a private record shaped by his awareness of his future reading public, and, finally, as a developing experiment in faithfulness. These patterns become especially visible in Volumes 5 and 6, published in 1997.

Merton sought, above all, to be faithful to the truth of what he had experienced; yet as a writer he knew—step by step—that his journal was both a record of experience and a storehouse of materials which

5. *A Search for Solitude* (Journals; ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 45. All subsequent references to this text will be noted parenthetically as *S*.

would inevitably have an effect upon many readers years into the future. His paradoxical need (as a writer) became how to document the facts of spiritual awareness, a reality that includes moments when one can be either discouraged or encouraged as one observes life unfolding over an extended period of time. For him, it was certainly not a matter of increasing spiritual perfection. At the core of this developing journal project, and I suspect his letter writing too, is increasing systematic honesty, and this is what we see so clearly in the recently published journals: *Dancing in the Water of Life* and *Learning to Love*.

Systematic honesty is what makes *all* of Merton's journals of significance, but especially the journals from 1962 forward. They are a complex document reflecting insight about this particular life; the record of plans, activities and incipient projects and disappointments; but they are, even more importantly, Merton's record of actually dealing with the frequent darkness of his spiritual journey. As noted, he sensed all of this early, and it is no accident that he was fascinated with the work of St John of the Cross already in the late 1940s. What Merton had to come to recognize, to some degree like the T.S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*, was that all life is always concrete—never theoretical—and therefore his own dark nights and frustrating contradictions had to be experienced, and lived through, and documented. Related to that realization (as a born writer) Merton also came to the conclusion that he, therefore, had an obligation to record as much as possible of his own honest truth—even if it was sometimes not flattering.

It is arbitrary, and an oversimplification, but the complete journals can now be divided into three basic groups. (1) 1939–52—pomposity and certainty: writing as a record of cleverness; (2) 1953–62—ambivalence about self: writing as a record of doubts; and (3) 1962–67—increasing honesty: writing as a record of bold honesty and acceptance. This not to say that there is not much overlap within these periods. All aspects are always there. What I want to stress is how Merton's sustained journal project while certainly honest already at its beginning, is even more so once he realizes that he has a multi-fold obligation: to write for himself as record of a spiritual journey; for posterity; and as a writer of integrity even when he does not particularly like what he feels he has to record.

This pattern becomes clear in Volumes 3 and 4 in the middle section of the project. The first period, 1939–52, was a time of great confidence: conversion, plans to write; vocation; preparation for ordination, and so forth. These 13 years reflect a certainty about earlier decisions. Less so is this the case at the end of his career, and

therefore within the journals published in 1997. These final six years from 1962 throughout 1968 reflect with great intensity Merton's questioning, and even uncertainty about his roles. There were so many. He was monk, Novice Master, conference facilitator, editor, hermit, ecumenist, lover, photographer, reader, writer about war, civil rights, and liturgy. He was poet, and sometimes contemplative, and so on. All these sometimes conflicting roles and pressures make the final years difficult to label because Merton felt the need of doing so much. We might suggest they were in a real sense years of turmoil while also years of fantastic, organized, literary production.

In between are what I myself have labelled the 'pivotal years', not so much just 1960–63 (covered in Vol. 4), but the almost decade of awakening, years of awakening from what he called his 'dream of separateness' beginning as early as 1952 and 1953 and continuing throughout the middle period. Thus, we have 30 years of journal—three decades and roughly three periods. The first batch reflects confidence and lasts about 14 years. The second period lasts about a decade from 1953 to 1962. The remaining seven years reveal an acute awareness of the need to provide a detailed and complete record about an explosion of interests, contradictions, hopes and disappointments.

These three periods are becoming shorter and the writing more energetic. This is related to the need to record honestly, a need that becomes greater as interests and responsibilities multiply. Merton is, therefore, deciding to be honest in all kinds of ways that he could not so easily do when he first started this sustained journal. The middle period of 1953 to 1962 is the moment when, I think, he consciously chooses to be unflinchingly honest. William H. Shannon's book *Something of a Rebel*, interestingly, divides all of Merton's writing into a similar three-part arrangement which reflects the writer's increasing consciousness about what he is doing.

Merton's honesty about (one might say) his honesty becomes one of the most compelling subthemes of the entire journal project and all the journals should be investigated along these lines. It is interesting that already within *A Search for Solitude* there is an entry, 18 August 1952, where he notes (as he is correcting page proofs for *The Sign of Jonas*) that the 'Georgia censor' had attacked 'the scruple which prompted me to say too many things I did not mean, but which I felt I had to say because they were things I did not like about myself' (S., p. 9). Here he has been caught in his own observations, so to speak. It is fascinating to note how then he also comments about this comment, and thus, retrospectively, helps us to understand what he is learning

to do as his journal project unfolds. What one includes cannot just be a record of what one does or does not care for, but rather it is much more importantly a matter of willfulness. This is a key: Merton notes of the journal writer in general, and of himself:

You have to distinguish what is ugly in you and what is *willed* by you and what is ugly—or silly—and not willed. The latter is never really interesting, because it is usually quite unreal and therefore not a matter for a journal—gives a false picture (S., p. 10).

Thus, we can assume that what this ambitious monk-writer chooses to do as a journal keeper after this particular moment of finishing *The Sign of Jonas* in 1952, around 1953, is to select incidents and details which will provide a 'true picture' of what was willed. This, I believe, is at the center of both Volumes 5 and 6. It is the element of willfulness that becomes crucial. This is what reveals the tension in the life and what provides the tension in the literary record.

Some related 1953 entries for 3 September and 13 September are especially interesting when studied in the light of Merton's earlier strategic comments and in connection with what he later does in journals. He realizes he functions best in solitude and he wants to be called into more silence; but he also realizes that he cannot easily—either in life or in the journal which reflects his selections about life—separate human 'willful' actions and his desire to transcend such venality. In fact he cannot. Luckily, such inextricability makes for very good journal writing and, as well, later, journal reading. Therefore, Merton will in these immediate pages accuse himself of paying too much attention to his Scholastics, but he can, as well, announce he has been making serious mistakes. Thus, he also comments, he needs

[a] complete new attitude. I have been fooling myself about my 'compassion' for the scholastics—my interest in them is uselessly human, and the job itself, even when most supernatural, is something less than I need and therefore—practically speaking—an obstacle—an occupation that complicates my mind too much for the simplicity of God (S., p. 15).

Of course what makes such an entry, and all related entries, doubly interesting is its suspense and its implied contradiction. We know, retrospectively, that Merton kept the job as Master of Scholastics, and a similar one as Novice Master for 13 more years. The entry is therefore archetypal Merton. His consciousness of his willfulness informs his strategy. He follows the preceding comment with a statement about his inability to write a book about St Bernard: to do so, he jokes, would be 'as if someone who just made a vow of virginity was told to

get married' (S., p. 16). Here we think, all right, no more such books; but of course, we also know he did write just such a book, *The Last of the Fathers*, and it appeared only two years later. There is no doubt Merton does often feel caught between a genuine desire for solitude related to his hope for experience of the transcendent and his quite strong desire for writing about all this: 'real tribulation—ground between millstones' (S., p. 15). What seems important, within the present examination of how all this plays into the journal project, is that he keeps asking questions of himself: Why even write all this down? You do so, he explains, because it may help with one's desired spiritual transformation, but you also do it, he ironically admits, because you have a contract for other books similar to *The Sign of Jonas*. The recently published correspondence of Merton and James Laughlin, his publisher and someone who became a close friend, provides even more evidence of Merton's overlapping and sometimes conflicting concerns.

### III

Merton's *Dancing in the Water of Life*, Volume 5 of the complete journal, continues to reveal the basic patterns of spiritual conflict and revelation which exist in the preceding volumes. *Dancing in the Water of Life* is organized roughly as a chronological unfolding, but this text is a complex combination of several manuscript sources. Part 1 is called 'Living as a Part-Time Solitary, August 1963–June 1964'. This part records the time when Merton is relishing his ability to be alone in his part-time hermitage. Some of his most lyrical writing results here.

Part 2 is derived from a completely separate notebook: 'The Suzuki Visit, June 1964', and is notes about a trip to New York City to sit at the feet of his revered Zen colleague. Part 3, called 'The Joy and Absurdity of Increasing Solitude', covers the period June 1964–April 1965, and deals with Merton's pleasures and ambivalences as he relishes his separateness. Following this section the editor, Robert E. Daggy, wisely inserts a draft of what later became the essay/book 'Day of a Stranger, [written] Sometime in May 1965'. Part 5, 'Hermit in the Waters of Life', May 1965–December 1965, continues the chronological account and is followed by still a sixth section labeled 'Some Personal Notes, End of 1965', which derive from the transcription of one of Merton's working notebooks (earlier edited by Jonathan Montaldo). One might debate if all this material should be included here, for some of it is not journal *per se*, yet the structure of this volume is proof of the need for perceiving the interconnections of all

of Merton's writing which seems to be seeking outward, seeking its audience.

This combination of inter-leafed material gives us a quite good account of some of the most interesting moments in Merton's mature life as he moved toward solitude, relished the quiet of these months, while at the same time he could not extricate himself from involvement in projects, correspondence, visits, monastic politics. Most significantly he reports the joys of learning to live by himself. It is not all cooking, and chopping firewood, and dealing with snakes and hornets' nests, and so on. Good points are made about how to pray.

To my mind what is perhaps most interesting about this journal is Merton's unrelenting honesty as he chronicles his dual concerns: loving the solitude of the developing hermitage-to-be, but still venting frustrations about the world beyond his special set of solitary circumstances. This journal stands as a model for other parts of the life as a whole which is a quest both for the spiritual and a record of that quest.

Volume 6 of the complete journals, *Learning to Love*, provides an even better set of examples of Merton dealing with a need to provide an accurate record about perhaps the most tumultuous period in his life. This book was composed during the time when he found himself mysteriously head over heels in love with a young student nurse, in the text allowed to remain 'M' because of the judicious choices made by the volume editor, Christine M. Bochen. This introduction is excellent for it deals with the difficulties that Merton himself must have had in putting these materials into words. Bochen raises legitimate questions about the one-sidedness of this report contrived by Merton about his genuine acceptance of love, his embarrassment, and the difficulty, as he so honestly reported it, of remaining faithful to his monastic commitment. *Learning to Love* is, therefore, a provocative example of Merton's consciously choosing to write about his 'willfulness' and doing so as honestly as he can manage.

The detailed episodes of the years 1966–67 in this journal are strong medicine (for Merton and the reader) but it is exactly what allows the journal writer to function on all of the three levels which I have outlined above. Above all, he had to be honest. Yet because he had already set up a trust agreement that would require that the journals remain in manuscript for 25 years after his death, most certainly he assumed everything he wrote about this episode of desperate love would eventually be published, and probably exactly as he chose to record it.

In *Learning to Love* we have the most explicit evidence of Merton's compulsion to be honest about what he is living through, yet also this journal is the most extreme example of a wish to put down the facts not just for his personal benefit but for many other reasons, and ultimately, in relation to his hopes that all this documentation will be made available for readers decades in the future. Many readers will, I predict, have great trouble digesting this journal because it is so amazingly honest. But what should be remembered is that this is just one element in a configuration of many Mertons. This journal is more than a record of an attachment to a young lady of 19. It is also the faithful record of monastic discipline.

During the period of *Learning to Love*, Merton is simultaneously writing journal materials about monasticism and civil issues, as well as about the personal matters of his spiritual journey, and often with little mention of his infatuation with the young student nurse. And we have to remember he is also producing letters, giving talks, planning books. These years were the most prolific part of his literary production. There are many Mertons here—all writing for future interpreters.

The same drive to keep detailed records, not just for self, but apparently for eventual publication is evident throughout Volume 5, *Dancing in the Water of Life*. There he writes on 16 August 1963 of a beautiful 'cool, dazzling bright afternoon ... an entirely beautiful, transfigured moment of love for God'. But note how Merton praises God and then castigates himself:

... a transfigured moment of love for God and the need for complete confidence in Him, without reserve, even when nothing can be understood. A sense of the continuity of grace in my life and an equal sense of the stupidity and baseness of the infidelities which have threatened to break the continuity. How can I be so cheap and foolish as to trifle with anything so precious? The answer is that I grow dull and stupid and turn in false directions ... It is usually a matter of senseless talking, senseless conduct, and vain behavior (*D.*, p. 9).

This entry has a direct tie to a related one following where Merton extends his concerns to questions about order within the religious life. (He is reading Romano Guardini's commentary on Jean Pierre de Caussade.) He is concerned about 'the responsibilities of the individual called by what does not yet exist and called to help it exist in, through, and by a present dislocation of Christian life' (*D.*, p. 10). He realizes he cannot know what all this means, and he feels caught and even confused while he also knows, however, that he must record his particular dislocations. It is as if Merton is thinking of others.

Merton's journal project should be recognized as something which fairly early reflects his awareness of its many uses, not just for himself, but for others during years to come. Thus the entire project is, on a fundamental level, a record of selected events with value as a documentation, but also as a running narrative of a private spiritual journey—troubles, trials and consternation carefully chosen by Merton.

To be of use to him and others Merton's selections have to be accurate and honest and representative of how he felt at particular moments. At the same time the writer's process of selection is affected in at least two ways as the journaling occurs: He knows, and again fairly early on, that what he chooses as raw material may later be crafted into other works, for this is precisely what he did in *The Sign of Jonas*, *The Secular Journal* and *A Vow of Conversation*. Thus, he chooses (maybe unconsciously to some degree) incidents which will be of literary interest later. Merton, as writer, knows that there is an extremely good chance that all these 'raw' complete journals will eventually be published. Therefore, he is *also* writing for readers who will come to his honest record decades or even centuries later. Those readers will absorb the journal entries in their honest completeness, not as a private spiritual record or as material to be crafted, but as the planned selection of thoughts and events which are valuable and enjoyable, precisely because this man of letters saw part of his responsibility to select material which would in itself—of itself—provide a compelling narrative because it honestly reveals his willfulness, errors, mistakes, desires, and so on. This is what makes *Learning to Love* especially valuable.

Merton's function as journal writer, then, works on several levels and more intensely so as he achieves maturity. It is a record of spiritual development and a depository for Merton's *running narrative* which he knows must eventually be read as a work which he consciously planned and consciously wrote to reveal how he (in retrospect) perceived his role as spiritual seeker within the larger context of society, church, monastery, personal relationships, and so forth, as these events 'inexorably moved on towards crisis and mystery' which, of course, most importantly he could not control—but which in the act of making a journal for 30 years he did in fact as writer control.

The best demonstration of Merton's not finally so surprising strategy is found throughout the various journal materials of 1966–67, and most energetically in the 'private' 'A Midsummer's Diary for M' (written for his loved one, the nurse), a combination journal love-letter which was composed at an almost feverish pace. It is included as

an appendix to this journal and it is a perfect example of Merton writing for himself and for others at the same time.

Throughout this tumultuous volume, the entries remain exceedingly private; but clearly this is 'raw' material Merton most likely would have refined, while also always it is an honest record of his turmoil, seeking and finding peace, a model for other readers later.

With these volumes, *Dancing in the Water of Life* and *Learning to Love*, we are closer to having a more complete record, but I stress the record is voluminous, and selected. The journals are only part of the total picture. Other primary materials are yet to be published, the ruminations in those hundreds of hours of taped lectures, for example. (See *TMA* 2 [1989], 3 [1990], 5 [1992], 6 [1993], 7 [1994] and 9 [1996] for analyses of fourscore tapes, and almost double that number of topics.) This will help to complete a portrait of Fr Louis—teacher, researcher, monk, spiritual master, lover, poet, seeker of peace. These newest volumes of journal are extremely valuable in helping us to understand the development of Merton's multi-layered life. These years, when he ceased to serve as Novice Master, drifted toward the hermitage and met the young woman called 'M', were years when he strove to integrate all such diverse experiences into a continuing monastic quest for wholeness and holiness.

Readers of *The Merton Annual* should also be aware that corrected paperback editions of the first four volumes of journals have now been published by HarperSanFrancisco. These editions are often improved because corrections have been included in each text. An appendix also has been added to the first volume, *Run to the Mountain*, with some additional journal entries. As is inevitable with a big project such as these voluminous journals—initiated in 1991 in anticipation of the 25th anniversary of Merton's death in 1993—adjustments can be introduced when interested scholars and general readers question particular transcriptions of Merton's difficult-to-decipher hand, or when additional entries are located. (I suspect that when the reading notebooks are edited and collated with the journals still more material, also of a journal nature, will be uncovered and added to future revised complete editions.) This publishers' willingness now to make corrections is good.

#### IV

As a resource for scholars the newly published letters between James Laughlin and Thomas Merton are invaluable for many reasons and maybe most importantly for the same reason as the journals. These

too need to be connected with all the other writing. Simply for study about the development of American poetry in relation to Laughlin's editorial role, this selection of letters has a substantial benefit. Other reasons are the documentation of the development of Merton's concerns on a wide range of literary and personal issues, from the quite private to his professional maneuvers; from comments about his love of his monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani (and all the places nearby), to the various impulsive schemes Merton continued to develop for publishing poems, articles and books—and often not just for himself but for others such as Ernesto Cardenal, Bob Lax, and so on.

Among the many things within this correspondence we find: (1) a record of the younger Merton's desire to be recognized not just as a religious writer, but as a serious poet; (2) a clear record of a developing friendship, not just a business relationship but a reflection of the development of a many-layered friendship between Merton and his publisher-friend who became his confidant; (3) a demonstration of a reciprocal relationship for both who came to love one another; and (4) thus a record of Laughlin's encouragement of Merton in myriads of ways; and therefore (5) a veritable catalog of scores of books sent by Laughlin for Merton to devour; thus (6) these letters provide a record of Merton's reading decade by decade; and (7) insight into developing plans for writing; and, as well, (8) much specific information about Merton's appreciation of still other friends who were also encouraging him, such as Victor and Carolyn Hammer.

Within these letters, already by 1948, Merton is requesting copies of journals by other writers—Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Gide—and obviously we can see that he is clearly planning to publish an extended version of his own journal. By 1950 Merton is confiding to Laughlin that he is already seeking a publisher (with Laughlin and Robert Giroux both vying for the honor). Clearly what we have here is a wonderful record of a monk who is a very ambitious writer, and a writer thinking, again, in terms of the long haul. During the earliest period, before *The Sign of Jonas*, Laughlin is giving good advice to let the journal 'mature'. Maybe this is why Merton waited until 1956 to start up the keeping of a journal again after the success of *The Sign of Jonas*. Interestingly, what comes across from these letters is that during this period of early public success, just as *The Seven Storey Mountain* is published in 1948 and as *Seeds of Contemplation* is going through many editions in 1950, Merton cannot avoid dealing with the fact that he now is a successful writer. How to sustain that success must have been one of his (at least minor) preoccupations during

these years—ironically just as he was ordained and almost simultaneously decided possibly he should not continue to publish poetry.

This exchange of letters indicates that Laughlin must be complimented for the work he did to encourage Merton throughout these ambivalent years. He knows Merton will write poetry. He sends books of other poets in the New Directions stable (Pound, Williams, Everson, etc.) so Merton will be able to stay in touch with modern poetry. Further, Laughlin writes frequently to say that with such a strong poetic gift, Merton must nurture it. Laughlin writes he cannot imagine that Merton, finally, could not write poetry.

All this also documents Merton's increasing conviction, I suspect, that he knows everything he writes—these letters to Laughlin, journal, poems—must have long-term value. What is most interesting is that already by 1950 we can see through these letters that Merton is developing plans for continuing to write in a large variety of ways—as essayist, journalist, historian, autobiographer—while also plans are slowly developing in the following decade to return to poetry. Much of this is, in fact, being worked out, formulated and qualified through the writing of these letters to Laughlin and, we suspect, to others too.

This volume, like the other selected letters, then, is a kind of continuing investigation and then deposition of raw materials placed, if you wish, in a bank. These letters are therefore one of those gold-mines that Merton and we draw upon, but once again they are proof of that need for a concordance. All this interrelated primary material provides a challenge to readers of Merton. The careful writing and the influence upon subsequent work and subsequent readers is wide ranging.

## V

Proof of Merton's wide-ranging influence and appeal is apparent in several books which have appeared recently. Three appeared in 1996, but did not receive attention in last year's bibliographical essay. These totally different investigations demonstrate Merton's significant influence in their conception and execution: all three can be digested in relation to Merton's continuing influence upon the present. Two more books to be noted appeared in 1997.

Ross Labrie, Francis Kline and Michael Downey have each produced totally different studies, yet it is correct to say that each of these books opens new ways to think about the significance of Catholic literary study, aspects of contemporary spirituality and the fruitful use of the imagination as we observe Merton's continuing

contribution to the present culture and as we move toward the twenty-first century.

Ross Labrie's *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* includes a chapter on Thomas Merton.<sup>6</sup> More importantly this extremely valuable study of how Catholicism informs American literature provides systematic analysis of writers from Orestes Brownson down to the present moment and writers whose Catholicism is of major import in their writing. Labrie has to be selective, of course, so there are not chapters on writers like Fitzgerald and Hemingway; that would be another story. Labrie's book is of major significance, nevertheless, because it is the first of its kind and provides good, systematic definitions about its subject matter and careful analysis of the works which he feels are central to the accomplishment of the artists he chooses. Thus we have here a methodology and a paradigm for future analysis of Catholic writers, the category that critics who seek to understand the enormously prolific work of Merton need to ponder. Labrie's chapters on writers as different as Paul Horgan and Mary Gordon are quite good because they demonstrate how this diverse literature incorporates fundamental Catholic elements within that larger category, American literature, while the literature is also emblematic of the integration of Catholic life and imagination within the wider culture. No one teaching American literature should ignore this book.

Labrie's examination of Merton is quite successful as an analysis of patterns and changes. (Labrie's own earlier book on Merton provides the foundation for the present study.) What is good about this Merton essay is Labrie's demonstration of Merton's connections not just with Catholicism, but with the larger culture. Both profited from this exchange. Francis Kline's book, in a wholly different way, suggests similar patterns of exchange.

Francis Kline's *Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church*,<sup>7</sup> is a deceptively simple, yet valuable book, clearly written and elegantly conceived. It is about how monasticism should be shared in the contemporary church, and it is a plea for monastics to share even more. A modern figure like Merton remains in the background here, but we must assume that the catalytic work which Fr Louis has accomplished has helped to stimulate the very atmosphere which Kline analyzes.

6. Ross Labrie, *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 1997).

7. Francis Kline, *Lovers of the Place: Monasticism Loose in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

This book is imaginatively organized with a framework at beginning and end where Kline describes the whole church gathered together, stimulated in various ways after the changes effected by Vatican II. Monastics, while at the margin, wearing their muted-colored robes, do play a significant role in the total drama. Why? Because of fundamental things which they have continued to learn from the Rule of St Benedict. Their are echoes of Merton's *Contemplation in a World of Action* here.

Michael Downey's book *Understanding Christian Spirituality*<sup>8</sup> is an overview of how study of Christian spirituality in the contemporary world is part of a wider phenomenon. As an emerging academic discipline, spirituality is described as an interdisciplinary study of Christian experience at a time when enormous numbers of forces (historical, theoretical, as well as experiential) are at work. Downey's treatment of Merton is minimal, but within the context of this inclusive survey the significance of Merton's work, especially regarding the 'true self', is acknowledged. Another text by Downey, *Trappist: Living in the Land of Desire*, published in 1997, can also be noted for it suggests the presence of Merton's spirit in today's world.<sup>9</sup> Merton's name appears at several junctures in the book and we get a feeling that this history of Mepkin Abbey, a daughterhouse of Gethsemani, which is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, reflects a strain of Merton's hope incorporated into its living spirit. One quotation of Merton suggests how the marginal person is nevertheless part of a larger picture: 'The monastic vocation is therefore by its very nature a call to wilderness because it is a call to live in hope. The monk carries on the long tradition of waiting and hoping'.<sup>10</sup> Often when Downey writes, one has the feeling that Merton's *The Monastic Journey* is his model. (This book is a spin-off from a documentary television program, 'Trappist', which was broadcast at Easter 1998.) Both a general commentary about monasticism and a history of this particular Cistercian abbey, it stresses the particularity Merton celebrated. All these books are proof of things moving together and of a unity in contemporary monasticism.

We see a similar unity in the valuable, critical analysis of Merton's work written for beginners, and standing as a valuable synthesis, in

8. Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997).

9. Michael Downey, *Trappist: Living in the Land of Desire* (photographs by Michael Mauney; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997).

10. Downey, *Trappist*, p. 169.



Shannon's new book, *'Something of a Rebel'*. This book focuses information for readers who need an overview about Merton's voluminous production. Its straightforward text will help new readers to build necessary connections about the complex writings of the prolific, yet paradoxically inwardly and outwardly turning, Merton. Shannon, well informed about all the primary and secondary literature, provides an introduction to life and writing; an examination of recurring themes in Merton's canon; and compendium of good suggestions for those about to continue reading Merton.

Was Merton a 'rebel'? Shannon asks good related questions and thus designs an inquiry which does an excellent job of showing how Merton both was and was not depending on how one views his relationships with various establishments. Shannon's text first draws us into the life at its most engaging period—when Merton, in his mid-twenties, surrounded by Columbia University friends, was hoping, planning, in 1939–41 to be a writer. That form of rebellion was perhaps a bit self-centered. The real 'rebellion' came later with the religious vocation and, paradoxically, increased as the monastic career unfolded with the support of being a writer, but as one increasingly less concerned with self.

In Chapter 1 the developing life as rebel is successfully sketched and a pattern revealed of ceaseless change and critical inquiry. What this means for any reader or scholar is that they must be prepared for the same activity. In the second chapter, 'Is Merton for Today ...?', Shannon demonstrates Merton's wide range of interests and why, therefore, he has such an enormous number of readers who keep returning to him. Shannon's most important accomplishment occurs in Chapter 3, 'The Merton Galley: Themes to Look for in Merton's Writing'. This 65-page critique is one of the best succinct overviews of Merton's thought. The first of these sections is called 'Interiority: Speaking Out for the Inside'. This essay, about the importance of the inner life, is carefully written and suggests how important its subject was for Merton, and how committed he was to the subject, yet how difficult it was, even for this famous writer, to interest mainstream culture in what appears to be such an esoteric topic. Shannon does this by way of consideration of a proposed article for the *Saturday Evening Post*. He explains how Merton wrote a letter to his editor admitting the complexity of the subject, and thereby wrote this own 'rejection notice'.

Because Shannon is so familiar with the correspondence he can often demonstrate how Merton made connections with the world beyond the monastery. Each of the subsections in Chapter 3, Identity,

Zen, and so on, are valuable. One might quibble with Shannon's choices in Chapter 4 where recommendations for initial reading of Merton are made. Basic and introductory texts are chosen. It might not be best to start with *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but it is almost inevitable that such a recommendation might be made. All the texts suggested and outlined by Shannon in this chapter are crucial to a full understanding of Merton. Shannon's study is an excellent introduction to the spiritual writings. As proof of the need for still more synthesis, however, it must be noted that this study is weak in hardly ever mentioning the poetry. Also because of space limitations Shannon can do little with the complete journals, and he simply does not have the space to do much with any actual detailed analysis of texts. Yet as a thorough study the book is excellent and without rival. It demonstrates that it is possible to begin putting many of the pieces of Merton's mosaic together without even the aid of a concordance.

## VI

Periodical material about Merton continues to appear at a steady rate, yet much is only of minimal importance. Much appears in relatively obscure places, and, as I perceive it, parallel problems of assimilation exist for our appreciation of isolated scholarly work published in periodicals as with the reading of Merton himself. (My own recent essay about Merton as postcolonial prophet, which appeared as the lead essay in an issue of *Christianity and Literature*, is an example.<sup>11</sup>) There I was seeking to show the significance of Merton's groundbreaking work. Here no attempt will be made here to survey all that appeared in 1997. Some reminders, however, of the need to be aware of the sheer volume, and subsequent need to sift among the materials which are appearing is appropriate within the context of the main concern of this review essay: so much is produced that we continue to be reminded that often the relative isolation of particular commentators, scholars (and even the relative obscurity of some journals), may signal the failure to comprehend necessary interrelationships which are so easily missed.

What follows is arbitrary, but if my thesis for this review essay holds—that Merton's body of work is enormous and consciously crafted—it is incumbent upon the researcher to seek ways to make connections, rather than to be content with an analysis (sometimes

11. 'A Widening Geography of Awareness: Thomas Merton as Postcolonial Prophet', *Christianity and Literature* 45 (Fall 1993), pp. 13-30.

congratulatory!) of separate items. I can now report that I am encouraged by some the recent work published in recent issues of *The Merton Seasonal* and elsewhere. Many articles demonstrate how connections need to be made as we realize that Merton's life and his written reflection of that life is a work in progress.

To be somewhat congratulatory, I single out a few recent articles. Still the best places to keep abreast of work about Merton remain *The Merton Seasonal* and The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland's semi-annual publication, *The Merton Journal*. Both reflect continuing sustained interest in Merton, yet both must be described as providers of work in progress. This should be interpreted as proof of the fact that, again, Merton produced so much that readers will take a long time to make necessary connections.<sup>12</sup> Clearly what is needed is more substantial scholarly inquiry about Merton published in mainline and interdisciplinary publications, studies which connect him with other figures he admired: Joyce, Faulkner, Camus, Zukofsky. In my opinion, among the most useful articles in the four most recent 1997 issues of *The Merton Seasonal* are the ones which point us toward still more specific ways of reading and making connections—as opposed to articles which are more or less laudatory, and while valuable and even factual, are not so much analytical as reportorial. In the first issue (22.1 [1997]) William H. Shannon's 'Can One Be a Contemplative in a Technological Society' (pp. 12-20) is useful precisely because Shannon shows how Merton's questioning allowed him to wrestle with significant technological questions. The article demonstrates how this type of questioning remains of value for today's readers and clearly illustrates how Merton confronted issues about the relationship of our culture's dependence upon technology and our need to be contemplative. It is not an accident that this piece should be by Shannon, who has sought in so many ways to perceive connections in Merton's writings; it pleases me to be able to mention the fruits of his many labors in three places in this essay.

Fundamental questions about society remained at the core of Merton's quest. Thus, Gregory Ryan's 'Kindred Spirits: Boris Pasternak and Thomas Merton' (22.2 [1997]) examines some of the parallels between Merton and Pasternak. This piece is almost a catalogue of the

12. *The Merton Seasonal* is published at Bellarmine College and was edited for many years by Robert E. Daggy. Interim editors for 1997 and 1998 have been Patrick Hart and Patrick O'Connell. *The Merton Seasonal* serves as an organ of The International Thomas Merton Society. *The Merton Journal* is the official publication of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland; 1997 is its fourth year of publication.

most important events in the developing relationship of Merton and the person he considered to be one of 'our [western civilization's] greatest writers. Heavy on quotes, nevertheless the article definitely assists in demonstrating Merton's prophetic awareness of the significance of a writer like Pasternak who was in some ways a model for Merton: each, however, finding 'himself in another who is at the other side of the world' (p. 11).

Walt Chura's article, 'The Seeds of Thomas Merton: On Staying Put and Changing your Life' (22.3 [1997]), is seminal, not because it is thorough but because it does an excellent job of demonstrating how stability also remains at the core of Merton's accomplishment as monk and writer. Chura demonstrates that Merton learned that while the 'American ethos fosters the values of renewal and growth [it is] often at the expense of rootedness' (p. 15). There is considerable in this insightful probing article, also a kind of overview, which suggests other areas for study.

John E. King's 'Finding the Thomas Merton Bibliographies: Identifying the Source Documents (22.4 [1997]) provides necessary information to be followed up as well. King shows which bibliographies exist and how these 12 reference works differ. He indicates how to locate these works, what their strong points are and the problems that exist because of the limitations which each of these 12 different bibliographies possess. Above all, looking at this useful article, we are reminded that study of Merton is a work in process.

Still more work in progress is seen in the 1997 issues of *The Merton Journal* (Vol. 4). Often these British journal issues include poems and papers given as talks at retreats, yet frequently, I have found, there are papers reflecting keen insight because these writers are making connections. I suspect in some ways a European is better able to see Merton than Americans. It is like the French looking at Poe, or Richard Wright or James Baldwin. Merton still today might sing the same song as Baldwin, 'Nobody knows my name ...', when it comes to Americans really understanding the nature of his *dual* monastic vocation as writer. Thoreau we think we understand. He was a nature lover and a misanthrope! He validates our separation from others. For Merton, always moving toward a holistic view, he could finally never think of humankind as a category to classify, or to be separated from. Each Blakeian atom radiates outward from individuals toward the wonder of the whole cosmos. In Volume 1 (Easter 1997) there are two good speculative pieces. One, 'Thomas Merton's Journey with William Blake' by Thea van Dam, reminds us that Merton's life-long interest in Blake would be worth considerable systematic study. We

could do with a book on the subject. Similarly, Catherina Stenqvist's article, 'Is There Something—or Nothing? Towards a Feminist Approach', incorporates her work on Simone Weil to build a framework for study of Merton's pondering of 'nothingness'. Here we are reminded, in what are really notes for further inquiry, of Merton's concerns with the feminine call for more systematic inquiry. Such questions will lead to future book-length work.

In the Advent issue, (Vol. 2, 1997) two more articles again stand out. Neither is particularly sophisticated, but both are of basic value. Dom Aldhelm Cameron-Brown writes about 'Thomas Merton and the Contemplative Tradition'. This talk is in fact a valuable overview of a 'remarkable spiritual maturity' (p. 5). Another talk, by Oliver Davies, 'Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart', builds on the idea that Merton (like Eckhart) is a paradigm of someone attuned to his immediate world. All four of the pieces which I have singled out here from *The Merton Journal* are in the best sense of the word, speculative. They force us to think about Merton's growth in relation to Blake whom he always loved; nothingness; the contemplative tradition; and Meister Eckhart from whom he learned so much. These article also remind us that each, as exploratory pieces, might well be expanded by other research into sustained inquiries.

Within *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* in 1997 at least one Merton article necessitates comment within the context of this review essay. It might be said to have limited value, but it reminds us once again that the energetic Merton was always seeking connections. This detailed study, 'Thomas Merton and the Ascetical/Mystical Tradition' (32.4) by Lawrence J. Altepeter, surveys a limited period in Merton's life, the moment between publication of *What Is Contemplation?* (1948) and the publication of *The Ascent to Truth* (1951). The article provides interesting historical background about the ascetical/mystical tradition within the church, and therefore information about the controversy which Merton would have known as represented by Adolphe Alfred Tanquerey, who insisted on a division between the ascetical and mystical which he argued was an extraordinary phenomenon, and Reginal Garrigon-Lagrange who consistently insists there is a 'basic unity and continuity between the mystical and ascetical aspects of the Christian spiritual life' (p. 516). Altepeter gives an overview of the division into streams, first proposed by the eighteenth-century Giovanni Scaramelli and then he demonstrates that the 1948 book, *What Is Contemplation?*, is fundamentally a restatement of Garrigon-Lagrange's essential views, with a significant point added by Merton that liturgy might play an important, positive, contemplative role.

Then, quite differently as a literary experiment, *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949) reflects Merton 'attempting to break free from the neo-Thomist and scholastic atmosphere' of his day by simply providing personal notes. *The Ascent to Truth* which follows, however, returns to that tradition, and again Merton remains in agreement with Garrigon-Lagrange. Merton states in *The Ascent to Truth* that contemplation represents 'the summit of the ordinary Christian life' (p. 527). This is tediously interesting, and the point to be observed is that Merton kept on changing, year by year and decade by decade.

This narrow study confirms, once again, what scholars such as William Shannon have already demonstrated: Merton kept building. Building on such knowledge and the particular detailed research of scholars such as Altepeter, future scholars must go several more steps. Thus, a comparison of Merton's 'Orientation Notes' for his 1960 course on Ascetical and Mystical Theology, along with the revised *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), would demonstrate Merton's continuing work in mysticism and in literary experimentation. Study of these evolving materials along with the complete journals, and so on, would most likely provide much more information about how, while remaining aware of the history of the ascetical-mystical split, Merton boldly developed new ways to remind himself and his readers of the fundamental unity of the spiritual life, while he found ways to catch the wonder of 'the hidden ground of love' in letter, journal entry and poem, sentence by sentence. Our job in process is to go back and make the necessary connections to Merton's core and to the cosmos.