

MERTON AND THE TIGER LILY

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Merton, Merton's biographer Michael Mott, and it would seem, the generality of Merton's readers, are in complete accord. *What Are These Wounds?*, writes Mott, was certainly "the worst writing Thomas Merton could do."¹ Fr. Louis himself, the year before his death, and in terms even more categorical, had already anticipated Mott's censure. On 6 February 1967, he drew up in graph form an evaluation of his books.² *What Are These Wounds?* there enjoys a very dubious distinction: it is the only book entered on the very bottom horizontal grid-line. It is not just "Poor;" not even, like *Exile Ends in Glory*, "Very poor." It is quite simply "Awful."

The full title of this awful book, brought out by Bruce Publishing Company in late February of 1950, is *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywieres*. But this was not the original title. Fr. Louis' preferred title — a title evidently less preferred by the publishers — was *The Tiger Lily*;³ and it is the image of the tiger lily that figures in the opening paragraph of the preface to the book:

1. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 257. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Mott*.

2. Reproduced in James Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 65 and in *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*; edited by Robert E. Dagg (Greensboro, North Carolina: Unicorn Press, 1981), pp. 125-126.

3. Michael Mott, too, prefers the title *The Tiger Lily*; see *Mott*, p. 257 and p. 606, note 205.

In the month of June, when the sun burns high in the bright firmament and when Cistercian monks, like all other farmers, hitch up their teams and go out to gather in the wheat, St. Lutgarde's Day comes around in the Liturgy Cycle She is a saint whose spirit is as ardent and colorful as the June weather and as bright as the tiger lilies that enliven the fields and roadsides of America in the month in which we celebrate her memory.⁴

The chief fault with *The Tiger Lily* is appropriately expressed, according to Michael Mott, in Fr. Louis' own comment about his *Exile Ends in Glory*, written about the same time as *What Are These Wounds?* "Where did I get all that pious rhetoric?" queries the author. "That was the way I thought a monk was supposed to write, just after I had made simple profession."⁵ Basically, then, the biography of Lutgarde suffers from an excess of pious rhetoric — but for this Fr. Louis had only himself to blame. For if it is true that his abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne, had encouraged the young monk to use his literary talents to make the Order and the contemplative life known and loved, it is also true that Dom Frederic's mandate concerned the use rather than the abuse of Merton's considerable literary talents.⁶ Nor does it add anything to Fr. Louis' stature as a writer or as a monk that, after having entered his self-critique about "pious rhetoric" in his private journal under the date 11 July 1948, and after having admitted, in the same entry, that "if I had never published anything but the *Mountain and Thirty Poems* I would feel a whole lot cleaner (*SJ*, p. 110), Merton was negotiating less than a year later, in June of 1949, the publication of a book he must have recognized even then as pretty awful. This was, of course, *The Tiger Lily*, which had been written some four years earlier as a young monk's present for his abbot.⁷ Unfortunately, in the immediate aftermath of the enormous

4. Thomas Merton, *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywieres* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1950), p. vii. Hereafter referred to in the text as *WATW*.

5. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1953), p. 110. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SJ*. Quoted also in Mott, p. 257.

6. Fr. Louis' occasionally, perhaps even frequently, voiced lament that he was writing only under obedience and in response to his Superior's initiative lasted until the day Dom James Fox told him to stop writing. At that point Fr. Louis decided that writing was an essential component of his monastic vocation: if he was to be a monk, he had to write. Certainly Dom Frederic had urged him to write, and almost as certainly had suggested the subject matter of his first few projects. But early along it was young Frater Louis who took the initiative in choosing his subject matter. This choice was, of course, immediately confirmed by the sympathetic Abbot. At that juncture, one could indeed say that Frater Louis was beavering away at this or that particular project because his Abbot wanted him to do so. But the Abbot was by now merely responding to the young monk's prior initiative just as surely as the young monk could claim to be obediently carrying out his Abbot's mandate.

7. See *WATW*, pp. x-xi. Though written originally as something of a tribute to Dom Frederic, the book, when actually published in 1950, was dedicated to the first community of Trappistines in the United States, which had been founded just a few months earlier in 1949 at Wrentham, Massachusetts. The dedication page reads: "TO THE CISTERCIAN NUNS / who are trying to love the / Sacred Heart of Jesus in / twentieth-century America / as He was once loved by / their great Patroness / St. Lutgarde of Aywieres."

success of *Seven Storey Mountain*, even Fr. Louis' laundry-list would have been considered publishable; and it is surely due as much to the popularity of the autobiography as to their intrinsic merits that both *Exile Ends in Glory* and *What Are These Wounds?* broke into print.

There is, however, yet another still earlier book of Merton's, identical in stamp with the St. Lutgarde biography, and meant, like it, to promote interest in the Cistercian Order and the contemplative life. If it did not break into print, this was, as Fr. Louis himself once told me (probably back in 1953 or 1954), because the original draft had been lost in the mail on its way to its prospective publisher. The author had obviously borne up under the loss of the manuscript, not just with stoic fortitude, but with a somewhat disconcerting hilarity: this was no real loss, but a providential blessing. And I still remember Fr. Louis' happy chortle when he told me the title of the book he clearly considered to have been even more awful than *The Tiger Lily*, namely, *The Valley of Wormwood*. Now "Valley of Wormwood" might smack vaguely of something from the pages of *The Divine Comedy* or *A Pilgrim's Progress*, but the more knowledgeable reader of Cistercian history would have recognized it as the original name of the wooded valley which soon after 1115 became the heart and center for the diffusion of Bernardine monasticism: Clairvaux, the Valley of Light.⁸ The book was to have been a collection of biographical sketches of early Cistercian monks and nuns; and the transformation of the Valley of Wormwood into the Valley of Light was no doubt meant to serve as a paradigm of the Cistercian experience. But though the original manuscript may well have been providentially lost in the mail, and though its author may wisely have had second thoughts about its publishability, the fact is that at least one copy had survived at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

The Valley of Wormwood surfaced in 1954, but anonymously, minus its original title and in mimeographed form.⁹ It was now meant only for

8. See William of St.-Thierry, *Sancti Bernardi Vita Prima*, cap. v: "Now Clairvaux was a locale in the territory of Langres, not far from the Aube — a den of thieves from an early date, and from olden times called "Valley of Wormwood," either because of the wormwood that grew there in abundance, or because of the bitter grief of those who fell there into the hands of thieves. There it was, then, in that place of horror and howling wasteland, that those men of virtue settled, soon to turn the den of thieves into God's temple and a house of prayer." (The easiest accessible Latin text is the one in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* 185: 211 C-D.)

9. The title page omits the author's name, but does refer to an "editor": *Cistercian Studies Book IV. Modern Biographical Sketches of Cistercian Blessed and Saints. Edited by a Monk of Gethsemani*. The "Monk of Gethsemani" identifies himself by tacking on to the end of Fr. Louis' "Preface," p. vii: "On the birthday of our patron, St. Francis de Sales, / fr. M. Francis de Sales, O. C. S. O. / THE EDITOR / Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani / August 21, 1953." The "Editor" would have been more correct to identify himself in somewhat humbler terms: he was the typist, not the editor — and a rather poor typist at that. The only signs of "editorial" intervention in a book badly needing editorial intervention are the excessive number of uncorrected typing flubs. Hereafter referred to in the text as *BIO*.

circulation within the Abbey and other English speaking houses of the Order; and it was making its appearance as simply one more item in a rather considerable body of locally mimeographed material devoted to matters monastic in general or Cistercian in particular. Since Trinity Sunday of 1951, Fr. Louis had been Master of the Students (or "Scholastics" as we were then known). He was, then, understandably concerned for the specifically Cistercian formation of his charges; the St. Bernard centenary of 1953 was a present reality; and recent visits from the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of Religious, Arcadio Maria Cardinal Larraona, and from the Dominican theologian who later replaced him in the Sacred Congregation, Archbishop Paul Philippe, had provided considerable encouragement for our systematic study of monastic and Cistercian sources. Reams of *monastica*, much of it poorly translated from the French and most of it badly typed, began rolling forth from our overworked but rather primitive mimeograph copier. It was in this context that *The Valley of Wormwood* finally made its anonymous appearance as Book IV in the series *Cistercian Studies*, and under the hopelessly prosaic title, *Biographical Sketches of Cistercian Blessed and Saints*. Here in 317 badly typed pages reproduced in fast fading purple ink, we have preserved for us (at least till the ink fades entirely) the fruits of Fr. Louis' early work assignments at Gethsemani, spent largely at a scriptorium table stacked high with Latin dictionaries and the huge folio volumes of the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum*.

If I have devoted this much space to that early collection of hagiographical notices churned out by young Frater Louis, this is because *The Valley of Wormwood* was of a single piece with *The Tiger Lily*. Indeed, that relatively brief biographical study of St. Lutgarde — less than two hundred pages — could be considered as something of an amplified version of the relatively long eleven page biographical notice written for *The Valley of Wormwood* (*BIO*, pp. 173-183). But I further suggest that both the Lutgarde study and the long series of hagiographical sketches are not only of some importance, but of considerable importance for anyone genuinely interested in the life and thought of Thomas Merton.

The document most important for situating these early works in their proper context is a three page memorandum typed in French, but with most of the accents missing. It was unearthed by Fr. Louis' secretary, Br. Patrick Hart, only on 14 April 1988, and not from the Merton archival material but from a file of documents concerning Dom Frederic Dunne, the abbot who saw Fr. Louis through from postulancy to solemn profession and

almost to ordination. Crested by the device "JHS / MARIA," the memorandum bears the caption (here in English translation), "LIST OF WORKS Submitted for the approbation of the Reverend Father Capitulants, O.C.S.O., Citeaux, May, 1946." Till now overlooked by scholars of Mertoniana, this memo should most certainly figure among the more important items in the Merton file.

The "List of Works" purports to be anonymous, but its author gives himself away in every line. This is obviously the young Merton writing in the mode of high, very high, camp. We also catch a glimpse of the utterly sincere but quietly determined abbot-manipulator at work. He writes:

Allow us to submit to you this list of works which, with the blessing of obedience and in filial submission to your judgment and to your will, we would very much like to undertake or to complete at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. As you can see, some of these books have already been finished; the others might take a few years of work to complete.

We are dealing in the first instance with a series of pamphlets of from 150 to 200 pages in length, IN ENGLISH, about Cistercian life, our history, our asceticism, the lives of the saints, etc. Among these there are also some translations of our twelfth-century Fathers, etc. There are also, as you shall see, some volumes of a more universal character.

If our Reverend Fathers have any suggestions or advice to offer, this would be a big help in guiding our efforts in the direction indicated by the will of Jesus, since it is only and solely for his glory that these works have been conceived.

The list of works is divided into two sections of unequal length. Section I is captioned "WORKS ALREADY FINISHED," and consists of nine titles: Title One is simply a new edition of the Gethsemani *Postulants Guide*, already printed in early 1946. Title Two, *White Monks of the Golden Age*, is none other than our *Valley of Wormwood*; "Not yet printed," writes Frater Louis, "but everything is ready." He describes the book as a large volume of almost 500 pages, containing the lives of the greatest twelfth and thirteenth century Cistercian saints, and based on information provided by the Menology Commission of the Order.¹⁰ Frater Louis stresses his concern for

10. Seraphim Lenssen, O. C. S. O., monk of Tilbourg, and specialist on all questions touching on the Cistercian Menology, had already produced a catalogue of Cistercians suitable for inclusion in an updated Menology back in 1937: Commission de Liturgie, *Actes de la Commission de Liturgie concernant de la Menologie cistercien. Sessions intercapitulaires de 1936-1937* (Westmalle: Imprimerie Cistercienne, 1937). The Cistercian Menology is the volume with brief biographical notices on Cistercian saints and blessed arranged according to their appropriate calendar dates; these mini-biographies were written to be read publicly at the noon meal, each notice on its corresponding date. Thanks to the Lenssen catalogue, Frater Louis' preliminary work was simplified: he had only to track down the sources specified by Lenssen in books housed variously in our scriptorium, our library, and our rare book room. Frater Louis' challenge lay, rather, in effectively utilizing this heterogeneous mass of material written chiefly in Latin, French, German and English. Particularly noteworthy here was the young man's ability to be at ease, already at that early date, with a kind of Latin for which his classical studies had not prepared him.

objectivity and truthfulness; but what he especially wants is to capture the true Cistercian character of our saints — their spirituality, their prayer, etc. Title Three is *Exile Ends in Glory*. Titles Five and Six are presented with an especially deft touch. These are the two earliest collections of his poems, *Thirty Poems*, printed in 1944, and *A Man in the Divided Sea*, scheduled for publication in April of 1946. (This chronological reference to the still future publication of the book helps date the memo to March or earlier.)¹¹ Possibly realizing that poetry was not the strong point of most Trappist abbots, Frater Louis is at pains to introduce these two volumes with a carefully worded description. They are

... two volumes of a more particular nature, but which caught the attention of a secular editor. These are collections of poems, almost all of which are religious and spiritual to the utmost degree; and they treat of the life of prayer and the love of God.

And what Trappist abbot would have the nerve, one might ask, to disapprove on general principle of poems which are “religious and spiritual to the utmost degree,” and which “treat of the life of prayer and the love of God”? “These poems were written,” Frater Louis adds, “in the world and then later in the monastery, by the same religious who undertook these other works.” Possibly fearing that not enough had been said to ensure the capitular Fathers’ approbation of these poems, the author notes that the first edition of *Thirty Poems* had sold out within eight months; and lest the Reverend Fathers miss the bit about the “divided sea” in the title of the second collection, he explains: “A man in the divided sea — an allusion to the Red Sea, type of baptism.”

Title Seven is his translation of Dom Jean-Baptiste Chautard’s General Chapter report, *The Spirit of Simplicity*, supplemented by a few texts excerpted from the writings of St. Bernard on interior simplicity, with a brief commentary. The “brief” commentary, we may note, took up 65 of 139 pages. Dom Chautard had treated Cistercian simplicity almost exclusively in terms of its material expression in the environment created around them by the first Cistercians. The young junior professed monk, by assembling and commenting on texts drawn chiefly from Bernard’s final sermons on the Song of Songs, both supplemented and corrected the overly re-

11. A few lines farther on, he refers to the Lutgarde study as not quite finished: “on le termine en ce moment” (“It is just now being finished”). Since Fr. Louis states in the preface to *What Are These Wounds?*, p. x, that the book “was undertaken as an anonymous pamphlet in 1945,” this reference might set the composition of the memorandum back as far as late 1945. It is true, however, that the Lutgarde could have been undertaken in 1945, but not finished till early 1946.

stricted presentation of the veteran abbot who was, at the time, regarded as one of the leading exponents of the life of prayer within the Trappist family.

Item Eight, *The Cistercian Life*, is no more than a reprint of a translation from the French of a general introduction to the Order — the only title in this list not authored or, it would seem, not translated by Merton. This brings us to the ninth title, which is *St. Lutgarde, A Study in Cistercian Spirituality*. In the context of the General Chapter of 1946, which was the first to convene after an eight-year hiatus due to World War II, a title such as *The Tiger Lily* would have doubtless struck the Reverend Father Capitulants as a bit frivolous. It would have needed, at any rate, a note of explanation longer than the author was willing to accord it. But we should carefully note that this prosaic title differs from the title adopted when the book finally appeared in print in 1950: *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic, Saint Lutgarde of Aywieres*. The earlier title, *St. Lutgarde, A Study in Cistercian Spirituality*, indicates clearly enough that the author's main focus was Cistercian spirituality rather than simply the life of the saint. If the title was later modified, we may further infer that this was because the life of a mystic has more general readership appeal than a study in Cistercian spirituality. Reading about a mystic is problematic enough — as the comment from the publisher suggests in a letter dated 23 June 1949: "... this is an attractive life of a saint who has a very attractive personality," he writes, and then adds, magnificently: "despite the fact that she is a contemplative and a mystic" (Mott, p. 606, note 205). In his own presentation of the book in his General Chapter memorandum, Frater Louis describes it as "A biography based on the *Vita Lutgardis* by the thirteenth-century Thomas de Cantimpre, with an analysis of the spirituality and the mysticism of the saint, according to St. Bernard, St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross." The book purports to be, then, a study of Cistercian spirituality and mysticism based on the life of Lutgarde, but viewed from the perspectives not only of Bernardine spirituality, but also from those of the two chief exponents of Carmelite mysticism, Madre Teresa and Fray Juan de la Cruz. This is important, perhaps even essential, to our understanding of young Tom Merton's orientation, and we shall return to it.

But first, we should note the works itemized in Part II of the memo, works still to be written. The list presents twelve subjects plus a series of translations (unnumbered) under the caption "(a) Cistercian Works." Illogically, the three subjects listed in the last part of the list do not appear under a parallel title, "(b) Works of General Interest," or something similar.

Further, though there are three projects described in this last section, only the first two are given a number, "1" and "2" respectively. The third entry remains untitled and unnumbered. Curious!

Title One is *The Cistercian Way of Contemplation*. It is to be a two-hundred page book written to answer the question: "What is contemplation according to our Cistercian Fathers of the Golden Age?" But Frater Louis notes that he is using "contemplation" in the broadest acceptance of the term:

the life of union with God, and the principal exercises of our contemplative life: the Opus Dei, Lectio Divina, manual labor and the life of prayer (*vie de Priere* = prayer in general), prayer (*Oraison* = prayer in particular), but particularly the teaching of our Fathers St. Bernard, Bl. Gueric, William of St.-Thierry and St. Aelred on the love of God. All this will be presented in a rather simple and summary manner, in order to show that the essential goal of our life is the life of heaven begun here below, FRUI DEO (= "to enjoy God") by means of love and the Cross.

This is a capital text. It is a summary statement of what, for young Frater Louis, Cistercian contemplation means: an anticipation of the life of heaven expressed in the Augustinian formula, "to enjoy God," but with specific reference to love and the cross as the principal means. This pair, "love and the Cross," may well be a discreet reference to the summa of Christian asceticism and mysticism by the then popular Dominican theologian and writer, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, that is, *L'amour de Dieu et la Croix de Jesus* (1929).¹² This projected work on the Cistercian way of contemplation lies behind a whole series of early books and pamphlets: *What is Contemplation?* (1948), *The Waters of Siloe* (1949), and even (to a much lesser degree) *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *Gethsemani Magnificat* (1949) and *A Balanced Life of Prayer* (1951).

To return to the list, Titles Two and Three are devoted respectively to *Cistercian Legends of Our Lady* and to the *Mariale of Adam of Perseigne* and the *Homilies of St. Amadeus on the Bl. Virgin*. The project for a volume of Marian legends was never realized, though Fr. Louis did return to it momentarily in the Marian Year of 1954, as a project involving the collaboration of the students in the Scholasticate. The specific references to the *Mariale* of Adam and the Marian homilies of Amadeus are a bit misleading, since Frater Louis goes on to describe an anthology of Marian texts drawn

12. The English translation in two volumes, *The Love of God and the Cross of Jesus*, appeared only in 1947 (Vol. 1) and 1950 (Vol. 2) respectively, published by the B. Herder Book Co. Note that the memorandum uses lower case for *amour*, but capitalizes *Croix* just as in the French title of Garrigou-Lagrange's book.

also from other Cistercian authors such as Aelred and Guerric, with notes and commentaries by himself. The final product would be a brief Cistercian Marian anthology, showing that "union with the Queen of Cîteaux — this is the way to arrive at an understanding and a living out of the Cistercian life of love and sacrifice." Here "love and sacrifice" corresponds to the earlier formula, "love and the Cross."

Next follow three book length studies devoted respectively to St. Aelred of Rievaulx and to others from his milieu, to Bl. Guerric of Igny, and to William of St.-Thierry. In connection with the study of William, there would also appear translations of the major works of this Cistercian, with Frater Louis' further notes and commentaries. Title Seven would be a *summa* devoted to *The Cistercian Laybrother*, in which the historical and ascetical material would be illustrated by anecdotes excerpted from early sources. This leads to Title Eight, a translation of two of the major sources of early Cistercian history and spirituality, the *Exordium Parvum* and the bulky *Exordium Magnum*. Item Nine would be *The School of Charity*, a booklet on Cistercian common life (or life in community), dealing especially with "our Fathers' teaching on the place and function of fraternal charity in the life of union with God." In his further description, Frater Louis notes that this is "something extremely important in Cistercian spirituality; St. Aelred even has a whole mystical theology of fraternal charity. We consider this work as being, at least with respect to the subject matter, one of the most important in this list." Given Trappist emphasis on the values of life in community, and the tendency of some to mistrust the contemplative dimension of Cistercian life as fraught with perils of subjectivism and individualism, the future hermit's emphasis on the community dimension of Cistercian spirituality was probably as prudent as it was sincere.

The Ancient Cistercian Liturgy was tenth in the list. This volume would have been based in part on the second part of a horrendously dull and very technical book about the early Cistercian Mass-rite by Fr. Fulgence Schneider,¹³ but would also have dealt with the Office and the cycle of feasts and fasts. The chief source of information would have been the liturgical books and manuscripts from the splendid collection of such material in the Gethsemani rare book room. Given the well known difficulties of Fr. Louis when it came to choral community prayer, this early interest of his in the sources of the Cistercian liturgy might surprise some — but only

13. Published serially in *Cistercienser-Chronik*, 1925-1928, and then revised and printed under the title, *L'Ancienne Messe Cistercienne* (Tilbourg, Holland: Abbaye de N. D. de Koningshoeven, 1929).

those whose knowledge about Merton and the liturgy is based on superficial reading and observation. The study of Merton and the liturgy has yet to be written. Certainly he lacked the patience and the technical competence to treat of things liturgical in a manner calculated to satisfy the professional liturgiologist. But his love for the tradition, his gift of interiorizing the realities that underly the texts, music and ritual actions of the liturgy, and his ability to articulate his personal insights in a manner meaningful for others — all this gave him a competence in liturgical matters that, though limited, was quite real, and might well be envied by more than one liturgiologist of our own day. To an extent greater than generally appreciated, it was the liturgy that formed the matrix within which Fr. Louis lived his life of prayer.

Title eleven, *Sanctity in the Trappistines*, refers specifically to biographies of nineteenth and twentieth century Trappistines. It was perhaps his work on the biography of Mother John Berchmans, *Exile Ends in Glory*, that first made Fr. Louis aware not only of the existence of houses of Cistercian nuns, but also of the vitality of their witness to his own vision of the Cistercian contemplative ideal.

Citeaux and Cluny would have been an attempt to deal with the true nature of the twelfth century Cistercian reform, with special reference to the concrete life and monastic observances of the early Cistercian Fathers. Whether this could have been done best in the context of the polemic with Cluny is another question. But, clearly, most of the first chapters of *The Waters of Siloe* could have been written for the projected but never otherwise realized *Citeaux and Cluny*. This part of the list closes with a reference to "other translations of our Fathers," but only two titles are offered by way of example, St. Aelred's *Speculum caritatis* and Pope St. Gregory's *Life of St. Benedict*.

Of a less specifically Cistercian nature are two anthologies listed under numbers 1 and 2 respectively: a liturgical anthology of hymns, responsories, prayers, sequences, etc. (drawn, however, especially from Cistercian sources); and an anthology of mystical poetry drawn chiefly from the writings of the great saints and from the liturgy. These two anthologies are introduced by the note: ". . . the same editor who published the two volumes of poetry mentioned earlier (that is, *Thirty Poems* and *A Man in the Divided Sea*) has also asked us for two volumes, of anthologies." This is what we may call Merton-talk. It is true that James Laughlin expressed interest in these two anthologies, but just as true, surely, that the idea originated with

Frater Louis. TM: "What about an anthology of liturgical texts, and another one of mystical poetry?" JL: "Great idea." TM (to the Reverend Capitular Fathers): "I have been asked for two volumes of anthologies."

Most interesting of all, perhaps, is the last book in the list. No title is assigned, and it is not even listed by number.

Finally, another volume, the biography or rather the story of the conversion and Cistercian vocation of a Gethsemani monk. He was son of artists, was born in Europe, and passed through the abyss of communism and modern-day university life before being led to the cloister by the merciful love of Jesus.

"Merciful love of Jesus" adds just the right pious touch to melt the hearts of the Fathers of the General Chapter. Unfortunately, there is nothing whatsoever in the Minutes of the General Chapter of 1946 to suggest that Frater Louis' memorandum was so much as mentioned. The abbots of Melleray and Bellefontaine were authorized (Decision 29) to publish illustrated brochures about their abbeys. That is all. To ask for further official approbation of books that had already been printed after having passed through the ordinary censorship procedure was hardly necessary. And to ask further for the advance approbation of books that were not even written as yet was hardly realistic. One might well imagine, too, the bemusement of the Capitular Fathers on learning that the anonymous scholar who had undertaken this impossibly ambitious program was a mere youngster still a year short of solemn profession, and, as a student preparing for his eventual but still distant ordination (late May of 1949), was still plugging away in the first or second year of the Gethsemani theology and canon law curriculum. Who, then, was this character who after a mere four years of Trappist life was already setting himself up as an authorized interpreter of Cistercian tradition?

Though it is difficult to overlook the not inconsiderable element of *chutzpah* in young Frater Louis' magnificent self-assurance, the fact is that in 1946 there was almost surely no one in the Order potentially better qualified than he to spearhead a return to the sources on the scale contemplated in his 1946 memorandum. Certainly there were monks and nuns more experienced in the ways of prayer and in the ordinary living of the Cistercian day to day life; certainly there were Cistercians with better credentials as historians, as theologians, and as scholars qualified to write and speak with authority about individual topics covered by the memorandum. There may even have been monks and nuns with a more cosmopolitan background, and with a more refined gift for poetry and literary expression

— though this I rather doubt. But no one so well as he could bring together into a certain kind of organic unity and with such passion all these various areas of interest. What the perceptive reader feels even in the *juvenilia* is that Merton is a man touched by God, and that even when he is dealing with topics of relatively slight importance, there is a sense that this is part of the broad sweep that carries him along in his thirst for the Absolute.

That Merton, after a mere four years of monastic experience, could have drawn up and have already realized in part the program which was the subject of his 1946 (perhaps even 1945) memorandum — this is absolutely mind-boggling simply as a technical achievement. It could also be noted that even in the case of those projects never seen through to the end, his initial spade-work provided him with material which he exploited to the full in later books and conferences and classes. Till the end of his life, he was still exploiting the material he had made his own in those first four years. But what is most important is the purpose and goal that informs his all-embracing vision of the meaning of our life: “The life of heaven, already anticipated here below — FRUI DEO, to enjoy God, to taste him, through love and through the Cross.” Whatever did not contribute in the most direct way to this program Fr. Louis relativized, one might almost say, trivialized.

But having written about the importance of this Cistercian tradition as understood and interpreted by the young Tom Merton, let me add that, actually, it never meant all that much to him. My authority for this is Fr. Louis himself. The paradoxical point I am trying to explain — if one can really explain it — can perhaps be situated in the light of a remark he made to me not long before his death. “You know,” he said, “the Cistercian Fathers never meant much to me. It was John of the Cross I got the most from.” This is a good example of Merton-talk; and if we are going to understand Fr. Louis, we have got to get used to statements such as this. They need to be interpreted. It is not only what he says, but what he means. In point of fact, the Cistercian Fathers patently meant a great deal to him. But John of the Cross meant still more. Why? Because John of the Cross dealt more directly and more consistently with the most absolute and the most ultimate reality of our union with God in the most immediate manner possible, and if I have used “most” three times in a single phrase, I mean to do so, because this fits Merton’s perceptions perfectly. Always, always, always Fr. Louis read the Cistercians from the perspectives of the Doctor of Mount Carmel. This is not the way to read the Cistercians, and Fr. Louis

himself appreciated the fact. I still remember his once remarking to me that, for a long time after he had started reading St. Bernard, he used to tell himself: "This guy doesn't know anything about prayer." He obviously changed his mind. But it is symptomatic that Frater Louis' first major published study on St. Bernard bore the title: "The Transforming Union in St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross," published serially beginning in April of 1948.¹⁴

It is hard to over-appreciate the decisive importance for the young Tom Merton of Jacques Maritain's masterpiece, *Distinguer pour unir, ou Les degres du savoir*, published originally in 1932, and only later translated into English as *Distinguish to Unite, or The Degrees of Knowledge*. Here was a masterly analysis of the ways of human knowing, culminating in the second part, devoted to the degrees of suprarational knowledge, in an exposition of the highest possible form of knowledge through mystical contemplation according to John of the Cross. Here Maritain achieved in this colossal synthesis a wedding between Thomism and San Juanist mysticism; and it was this synthesis that served as the norm by which Merton measured everything that touched on prayer and the ultimate realities of the spiritual life. The teaching of other books on prayer and mysticism had, for the young Merton, to fall into the categories provided by Maritain's study of mysticism; and it is surely no mere coincidence that in Frater Louis' formula about the goal of Cistercian life as an anticipation of the life of heaven in which we taste God through love and the Cross, "*par l'amour et la Croix*," we find an echo of the title of a book by another Thomist, the masterpiece, first published in 1929, Garrigou-Lagrange's *L'amour de Dieu et la Croix de Jesus*. The full title explains the content of the book: "A Study of Mystical Theology on the Problems of Love and the Passive Purifications according to the Principles of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Teaching of St. John of the Cross." For Fr. Louis, St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross went together; and it was these two who later provided the categories for his exegesis of more than one passage of Cistercian hagiography. It is typical that in the brief bibliography appended to *What Are These Wounds?*, of the twenty-three titles, most of which deal with Cistercian hagiography and history, there is still room for the complete works of Duns Scotus, the trilogy of St. John of the Cross (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night of the*

14. In five issues of the Order's periodical, *Collectanea Ordinis Cisterciensium Reformatorum*, between April 1948 and October 1949; made available in off-print, and subsequently reprinted in *Thomas Merton on St. Bernard*, Cistercian Studies Series 9 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1980), pp. 105-240.

Soul, The Living Flame of Love), Poulain's *The Graces of Interior Prayer*, Teresa of Avila's *The Interior Castle*, and the complete works of St. Thomas Aquinas.

It is symptomatic, then, that when young Frater Louis was free to choose a subject for his first extended venture into the field of early Cistercian hagiography, he chose the mystic St. Lutgarde. There were a dozen other Cistercians whose lives he had epitomized in his *Valley of Wormwood*, and about whom he might have written. But it was Lutgarde who, he decided, best served his purpose, which was that of showing what Cistercian *mysticism* is all about: but this, for Frater Louis, was quite the equivalent of showing what Cistercian life in general is all about — mysticism, love and the Cross. These realities filled her life; and these realities are explicit in the final title of the book: *What Are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic*.

To understand still better the context in which *The Tiger Lily* was written, one would have to write at some length about Dom Frederic's all-consuming love for the Sacred Heart, a love that touched on the life of the community as a whole and more particularly on the lives of individual monks; about the fervor and devotional life of Gethsemani in the immediate aftermath of that cosmic upheaval known as World War II; about the importance of the papal encyclical *Mystici Corporis* which had just been published in June of 1943; about the importance of the atmosphere at Gethsemani colored as it was by popular books of piety such as the visionary Sister Josefa Menendez's *The Way of Divine Love, or The Message of the Sacred Heart to the World* — a work published in English only in 1950, but which was circulating in the monastery in the French original (1938) as well as in a locally translated version; and about the importance of the reality of vicarious suffering and of intercessory prayer in the lives of most of the brethren of those days. But most of all we have to remember that Frater Louis was already preparing for his ordination to the priesthood. He was to write a few years later:

My priestly ordination was, I felt, the one great secret for which I had been born. Ten years before I was ordained, when I was in the world, and seemed to be one of the men in the world most unlikely to become a priest, I had suddenly realized that for me ordination to the priesthood was, in fact, a matter of life or death, heaven or hell. As I finally came within sight of the perfect meeting with the inscrutable will of God, my vocation became clear. It was a mercy and a secret which were so purely mine that at first I intended to speak of them to no one. (*SJ*, p. 181)

Accordingly, it is of vital importance not to separate Fr. Louis' obsession with mystical prayer from his priestly vocation which, as he put it "made me belong not only to God but also to all men" (*SJ*, p. 181).

Basing himself almost exclusively on the thirteenth century *Vita Lutgardis* by the Dominican theologian who was both her spiritual director and her spiritual son, Thomas of Cantimpre, Frater Louis followed basically the same structure he had followed for most of his biographical notices in *The Valley of Wormwood*.¹⁵ He simply moved through the text, extracted the passages which struck him as most relevant, paraphrased them (or in some cases, actually translated them), and added, usually, his own frequently insightful comments, with special attention to the introductory and concluding paragraphs of each hagiographical notice. As a reader of medieval hagiography, however, one of Frater Louis' otherwise greatest assets may here have been something of a liability, and a lifelong one at that. He had a genius for skimming through a text and extracting from it the essential. But this is not the way to read medieval hagiography. Even the less gifted medieval authors generally couched their texts in terms redolent of biblical, liturgical and patristic overtones, so that the rhetoric often enough became part of the message. Thus, in his earliest hagiographical sketches and in his Lutgarde study, he was a bit like the enthusiastic amateur archaeologist whose preferred instrument for excavation is the bulldozer. Still, for a good many of us, the chunks of material quarried by the young hagiographer still retain considerable interest. And if you do not know Latin or French, but would like to find out a bit about William of Bourges or Abundus of Villers or Idesbald of the Dunes, *The Valley of Wormwood* could still serve a useful purpose. The same is even more true of St. Lutgarde and *What Are These Wounds?* In brief, the Lutgarde effort is something of a retelling of the life of the saint as a kind of practical *summa* of what Cistercian life is all about.

The book is divided into nine chapters that follow the chronology of the Life: Lutgarde's childhood in a bourgeois family, her education in a Benedictine convent, her vocational crisis involving a choice between two different kinds of love, and her first mystical graces (chapter one); her life first as a simple nun, then as prioress of the Benedictine convent of St. Catherine's — a chapter which contains a theological analysis of mystical marriage (chapter two); her transfer to the Cistercian nuns of Aywieres,

15. The edition used by Merton was the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum*, Jun IV. p. 187 ff.

with special emphasis on the first of her three seven year fasts in the context of the Church's conflict with the Albigensians (chapter three); a discussion of preternatural phenomena, such as Lutgarde's mission to souls in purgatory, her power over demons, her ministry of healing (chapter four); a very special chapter devoted to Lutgarde and sinners (chapter five); then two long chapters which account for 67 of the 191 pages of the book: "The Spirituality of St. Lutgarde. Her Mysticism" (chapter six) and "St. Lutgarde's School of Mysticism at Aywieres. Her Relations with the Order of Preachers" (chapter seven); finally, a description of the saint's final years and death (chapter eight), and her miracles after death and her *cultus* (chapter nine).

Frater Louis is frankly somewhat embarrassed by the preternatural character of much of Lutgarde's experience: too many visions, too many locutions, too many miracles. There are perhaps two main reasons for this discomfort. The first is simply that practically everyone nowadays gags at the idea of private revelations, levitations, stigmata, prophecy, miracles, souls in purgatory. Now this sort of thing simply cannot be discounted in a work such as the *Life of Lutgarde*. Frater Louis falls all over himself in his eagerness to reassure us that none of this belongs to the essence of the mystical life. It is interesting to note, too, how he occasionally tones down some of the potentially offending elements of the Latin narrative. Thus, when, early in the book, reference is made to Lutgarde's power of healing, the words "power of healing" are set off by quotation marks to suggest that we should refer to such a power only with qualifications; and where Thomas of Cantimpre speaks of Lutgarde's gift of healing people of their sicknesses *tout court*, Frater Louis' paraphrase refers to "little sicknesses" and "minor ailments" (WATW, p. 11). But there is a more particular reason why the extraordinary in Lutgarde's life fits Frater Louis' purpose but poorly, for his Cistercian ideal is one that situates mysticism of the loftiest kind within a context of utter simplicity and ordinariness. Perhaps the most revealing passage that expresses this contradiction well is one that comes at the end of the chapter on Lutgarde's school of mysticism. It is a passage I particularly like:

But all that has been said so far must not obscure the fact that these thirteenth-century mystics with whom we have mostly been dealing do not represent the pure Cistercian spirituality that characterized the first of the Order's history. In St. Lutgarde we find practically nothing of the beautiful and simple zeal which was the very foundation stone of the Order — the zeal for the Rule of St. Benedict in its purity, the zeal for labor in the fields, silence, solitude,

community life, monastic simplicity, and that concern with doing ordinary things quietly and perfectly for the glory of God, which is the beauty of pure Benedictine life. Of course, St. Lutgarde was Cistercian and Benedictine in her spirituality, in her love of the Divine Office, in her love of Christ above all else; but she lacks this Benedictine *plainness*, and this Cistercian technique of humility which consists in a kind of protective coloring, by which the monk simply disappears into the background of the common, everyday life, like those birds and animals whose plumage and fur make them almost indistinguishable from their surroundings. (WATW, pp. 158-159)

This dimension of the ordinary was central also to Fr. Louis' understanding of his vocation to the priesthood:

[God] does not sanctify us patch upon patch. He does not make us priests or make us saints by superimposing an extraordinary existence upon our ordinary lives. He takes our whole life and our whole being and elevates it to a supernatural level, transforms it completely from within, and leaves it exteriorly what it is: ordinary.

So the grace of my priesthood, the greatest of my life, was to me something far greater than a momentary flight above the monotonous lowlands of an everyday existence. It permanently transformed my ordinary, everyday life. It was a transfiguration of all simple and usual things, an elevation of the plainest and most natural acts to the level of the sublime . . . (Sf, p. 182)

Now, in no way do I wish to dispute the contention of Michael Mott and of Merton himself that *What Are These Wounds?* is an awful book. But it is also true that, even if we are not all that interested in Lutgarde, we are in the young Merton, and in much the same way that the musicologist is interested in the *juvenilia* of Mozart and Beethoven or the literary critic in that of Hemingway or Faulkner. When a composer or an author becomes an institution — and Merton is something of an institution — it is inevitable that scholars begin studying his or her early works if only because of the light they shed on the composer's or the author's later development. But what moves me, and moves me deeply when I think of *The Tiger Lily*, is not that we find in it the seeds of ideas that Fr. Louis developed later on in a more mature manner, but that this clumsy early effort in mystical biography portends something of Fr. Louis' own later spiritual experience.

One of the features common to the experience of all those early Cistercian mystics was their personal involvement in the working out of the whole mystery of Christ, and in such a way that, wherever there was need of love and mercy, they had a particular mission. The marvelous life of the leper nun Alice offers perhaps the best example: as the sphere of her bodily activity gradually diminished until she was left totally paralyzed, blind, and literally rotting away in the final stage of leprosy, the sphere of her love and

concern reached out and grew to the measure of the universe, a measure that embraced not only earth, but purgatory and even — though this is theologically hard to explain — hell.¹⁶ Contemplation for mystics such as these meant more than a gaze fixed upon God: it meant their personal transformation into the object of their contemplation. And this object was by preference, in the best Bernardine tradition, Jesus the Leper, Jesus the Poor Man, Jesus in the lowly condition he assumed for love of us. To contemplate means, once again, to be transformed into the object of our contemplation.¹⁷ Frankly, I do not believe that St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross offered Fr. Louis categories sufficient to express with total adequacy what the life of Cistercian contemplation really meant. The terms of their analysis tended to remain, as understood by Fr. Louis, too much at the level of psychological introspection, for which he had, God knows, a gift as great as the St. Augustine of *The Confessions*. But in its essential thrust, Fr. Louis' spiritual experience at Gethsemani grew to be quite aligned with that of so many of the mystics of the Golden Age, and about whom he had written in *The Valley of Wormwood*. He had always felt a certain identification with the poor and the suffering. His brief but wholly sincere flirtation with Communism in his student days, and his later involvement with Friendship House in Harlem are cases in point. But this was as nothing in comparison to his later experience within the monastery, as more and more he came to share in the sufferings of those affected by the horrors of the Vietnam War, by the threat of universal nuclear conflict, by racial and social injustice rampant on a worldwide scale. The huge volume and the urgent tone of his published writings on these and related issues, as well as his personal correspondence of the period, all attest to a deeply felt anguish of all but cosmic proportions. More and more the whole world became his cloister, so to speak. There was a further painful development in his own prayer life. While "highs" and "lows" alternating in a somewhat disconcertingly rapid succession may well have continued to be characteristic of his prayer, and though his official entrance into his hermitage on St. Bernard's day, 1965, certainly marked a peak in his monastic trajectory, the

16. The only easily accessible Latin edition of the remarkable biography of Alice (or Alyedis) is in the Bollandists' *Acta Sanctorum*, Jun II, p. 471 ff.

17. Bernard's formulation of this theme is best expressed in his first sermon for the First Sunday of November, where he wrote: *Similis eris illi, cum videris eum sicuti est; esto et nunc similis ei, videns eum sicut propter te factus est* ("You will be like unto him when you see him as he is [i.e. in his glorified state]; so be like unto him even now, as you see him as what he has become [i.e. the servant and leper] for your sake." For the entire sermon, see Jean Leclercq and H. Rochais, *Sancti Bernardi Opera* 5 (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1968), pp. 304-306.

months that followed were nothing if not painful. More and more he had to abandon the self-image he had once had of himself as the dedicated hermit; and in the isolation of his hermitage — an isolation mostly of his own imagining, and one that was more spiritual than physical — his pain increased, both physically and psychologically.

His activity became even more frantic as his inner solitude deepened. To say that he cut corners is to speak in euphemisms. He cut corners on a heroic scale, even while remaining, in his ordinary routine, faithful to the monastic way to which, however contradictory it may seem, he believed in more than ever. He could bitterly and sincerely grieve over the transition from Latin to English in the monastic liturgy, even while reaching for the fifth of whiskey squirreled away under his bed through the well-meaning connivance of his friends. He fell in love, hopelessly and desperately in love, even while realizing in his heart of hearts that months later he would be looking back and saying: "I've been acting crazy."

Nor did it help at all when we elected as successor to Dom James Fox in the abbatial office a young hermit-monk, Flavian Burns, whose ministry within the community was beholden in every respect to Merton's own monastic theory and ideals. Fr. Louis could now travel if he wished to do so; he could now do well-nigh anything he wanted. But by now, everything had turned to dust. The Valley of Light had once more become the Valley of Wormwood.

This does not mean that there was all that much discernible difference that could be noted in him outwardly. He may at times have been slightly more irascible, more hypersensitive, more critical, resentful and suspicious; but he was also just as funny if not funnier than ever. He had bouts of wild enthusiasm as well as moments of deep depression — but this had always been the case with him. Certainly he was rough with certain individuals — though I can also assure you that he was, if anything, more tender, more gentle and more delicately considerate of certain of his brethren. And, of course, he looked forward to his Asian journey, looked forward to it with great joy. He was marking the days in anticipation of what seemed to be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. But

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.¹⁸

Everyone will have recognized these lines from Eliot's "Little Gidding" in the poem cycle "Four Quartets," where Eliot had spoken so insightfully as to the nature of contemplation, the young Fr. Louis once claimed, that there was now no longer much reason for himself to go on writing about it. "And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time . . ." Is it more than coincidence that the first two published works of Frater Louis in the field of monastic biography were titled *Exile Ends in Glory* and *What Are These Wounds?* — that already this beginning portended the end? The garish jacket cover of the Lutgarde effort had her gazing mawkishly on the wounds of Christ crucified. But Fr. Louis would surely have looked often at his own hands and would have asked repeatedly the same question, "What are *these* wounds?" For in the palms of his hands could still be seen throughout the whole of his monastic life the scars left by nail-wounds. "My stigmata," he once joked — but it was no joke. In one of the sections excised from the final published version of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes in a now missing chapter, "The Party in the Middle of the Night," a drunken brawl that had taken place at Cambridge on 14 November 1933, which was the eve of the Feast of the Dedication of Gethsemani.

One of the students — and this was surely Merton — agreed to be nailed (or pretend he was being nailed) to a cross. In the drunken chaos that followed, everything seemed so out of control that the mock crucifixion came close to being a real one.¹⁹

What are those scars in Merton's hands? Are they the relics of some monstrous act of blasphemy perpetrated by a group of drink-crazed Cambridge undergraduates? Not really. If you want to act out a blasphemy, you stamp on a crucifix, or you celebrate a Black Mass, or you flush a consecrated Host down the toilet. You do not stretch out your hands for nails to be driven in.

The truth is that Fr. Louis was one of those who, like the mystic Lutgarde, like the leper Alice, like others in *The Valley of Wormwood*, had

18. T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), pp. 144 and 145.

19. Michael Mott discusses the episode in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, pp. 78-79, with special reference to notes 114-117, p. 585, based largely on material supplied by Naomi Burton Stone, Merton's longtime friend, confidante, and literary agent.

in his own way been touched by God. But to be touched in such a way by God means to be wounded, means to be marked with the wounds of Christ. The theme of that wound runs from the Song of Songs (*vulnerasti cor meum . . .*) through Origen through St. Bernard through St. Francis through St. John of the Cross and even to Fr. Louis. The charred flesh that for two hours had been eaten into a river of electric fire in Fr. Louis' Bangkok solitude — was this perhaps sign and symbol of that deeper, that hidden wound left by the touch of God, that wound from which Fr. Louis' vocation as writer with a universal mission derived its efficacy?

In the leaflet prepared for Fr. Louis' funeral Mass, the front page began with a quotation from the "Mercy within mercy within mercy" passage from the closing page of *The Sign of Jonas* — "Have you had sight of Me, Jonas My child? Mercy within mercy within mercy . . ." (*SJ*, p. 362). And at the end of the Mass I played a page of Mozart — the composer who more than all others was loved by Fr. Louis as the one whose music breathes the wise innocence of childhood and the joyful seriousness of holy wisdom. Finally, just before the funeral procession to the cemetery began, our Br. Sebastian read from the ambo the final lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, where God speaks to the young monk, saying:

You will have gifts, and they will break you with their burden. You will have pleasures of prayer, and they will sicken you and you will fly from them.

And when you have been praised a little and loved a little I will take away all your gifts and all your love and all your praise and you will be utterly forgotten and abandoned and you will be nothing, a dead thing, a rejection. And in that day you shall begin to possess the solitude you have so long desired. And your solitude will bear immense fruit in the souls of men you will never see on earth.

. . . you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high place of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My mercy which has created you for this end and brought you from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York City to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani: "That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men."²⁰

20. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948), pp. 422-423.