

## An Interview with W. H. (Ping) Ferry about Thomas Merton

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*Conducted by Paul Wilkes, March 18, 1983*

*Transcribed and edited by Paul M. Pearson*

Thomas Merton first wrote to W. H. “Ping” Ferry (1910-1995) in a letter dated September 18, 1961. At that time Ferry was the vice president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, California. Merton had been introduced to pamphlets produced by the Center by their mutual friend, James Laughlin, Merton’s publisher at New Directions. That first letter marked the beginning of a prodigious exchange<sup>1</sup> of approximately two hundred and fifty pieces of correspondence that would continue until Merton’s last card to Ferry on December 5, 1968, just a few days before his death in Bangkok.

On the surface it was an unusual friendship – the hermit and the family man; the enclosed monk, whose mail was censored and whose access to the current media was negligible, and the public intellectual at the heart of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions; the solitary living with the basics of the Trappist life and the glutton of the good life. However, as James Ward notes in his biography of Ferry,<sup>2</sup> the two had much in common – both were lifelong spiritual seekers; they were workaholic intellectuals writing on a wide variety of subjects; and both were fired with a longing for peace and justice.

Merton’s friendship with Ferry provided Merton with a regular and up-to-date source of information about the pressing events of

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1. Many of Merton’s letters to Ferry can be found in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 201-45 (subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text), and in *Letters from Tom: A Selection of Letters from Father Thomas Merton, Monk of Gethsemani, to W. H. Ferry, 1961-1968*, chosen and edited by W. H. Ferry (Scarsdale, NY: Fort Hill Press, 1983). The complete list of materials is available on the Thomas Merton Center web site: [www.merton.org/Research/Correspondence/z.asp?id=630](http://www.merton.org/Research/Correspondence/z.asp?id=630).

2. See “Father Louis and Doctor Ferry” in James Arthur Ward, *Ferrytale: The Career of W. H. “Ping” Ferry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001) 115-30.

the time. This was especially true in the period when Merton was not allowed to publish on issues relating to war and the nuclear arms race when Ferry also provided Merton with a vital outlet for circulating his mimeographed essays and letters. Besides issues relating to war and peace their correspondence covered a vast array of other issues including racism, politics, media and advertising, technology, the Church and the Second Vatican Council, the economy and democracy. Ferry also introduced Merton to numerous authors who would influence his thinking during this period, including writers such as Jacques Ellul and Lewis Mumford. Ferry was also a resource for Merton when he was working on his anti-poem *Cables to the Ace*, writing to Ferry asking that he send him “good, gaudy, noisy ad material” and “also the most smart and subtle ads” adding “I think this is even more important than reading the day’s news. I mean for feeling what is in the air” (HGL 229). This interview was conducted by Paul Wilkes in the course of shooting his 1984 film *Merton: A Film Biography*, and parts of it appear in the film; an abbreviated, reordered and rewritten version of the interview is included in Wilkes’ volume *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best*.<sup>3</sup>

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**Paul Wilkes:** We were talking yesterday about when you first corresponded with Merton. . . . Why don’t you tell me about the first time that you actually saw him, face to face and what had you expected and what did you find?

**W. H. Ferry:** I went to see Tom about four or five months after his first letter came, in which he said he was very interested in the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and he’d liked what he had seen, what we had produced, and he’d like to participate in some way. I couldn’t imagine even going to see him, but I certainly explored all the ways through the mail that this kind of participation would be possible. And very soon he invited me to come out to Gethsemani and I went there, as I said, four or five months later. I didn’t see him when I arrived. I came in the rain at the end of a day around 9:00 p.m. and Gethsemani, with all respect, is a pretty gloomy pile at any time, and was terribly gloomy that night. A rather grumpy monk met me at the gate and said he wasn’t sure I

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3. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 87-93.

was expected; anyway it was nine o'clock at night and everybody had long since gone to bed. He let me in, however, and soon found out that I was indeed expected and so he took me to the guest quarters and I dosed down for the night. Tom came round to see me shortly after breakfast. He was like what I expected. I'd seen a good many pictures of him and I'd heard a great deal, of course, from James Laughlin, and from others. He was a sort of legend even then in 1961 because of his books and because of the essays which were appearing here and there, largely in the Catholic press but sometimes outside. And so, I was absolutely delighted to have this opportunity to go into a strange country called Gethsemani, and to meet this fabled man.

**Wilkes:** When he comes into your room and you meet him, what are the first things that you say?

**Ferry:** Well, he said he was delighted to see me, he was delighted to meet the source of so many remarkable documents. He was, of course, the country's principal document gobbler. He read everything and anything and I was a considerable document pusher myself, so we had a very good relationship from the start. We struck it off immediately. I don't remember the details, the first day. I was sort of dancing around not knowing quite where our conversation would begin or end. It was largely on the main issue of the day, as far as I was concerned, which was the question of bombs, of all things, and Tom by that time had got quite deep into this question morally. He hadn't written a great deal at that point but he was beginning to write about this issue and it was an issue which was on the table a good deal of the time at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

**Wilkes:** He was a man who amazed a lot of people by knowing as much as he did about what was happening in the outside world. How did he do this? Did he have really a good perception of what was going on in the world outside?

**Ferry:** Well, he read constantly. I don't think anything I ever sent to him was stopped; some things were stopped, he told me, and there were periods in which a great deal was stopped. I see from looking back at some of his letters that there was a period of six or eight months when he said he hadn't received anything that kept him in the picture. He subscribed to *Le Monde* and to one other paper – it wasn't *The New York Times* or anything like that – a Brit-

ish paper, I believe. And to no American papers that I am aware of, and I am sure that that is the case. His number one source of intelligence during the years that I knew him, as far as domestic situations were concerned, was Izzy Stone.<sup>4</sup> *I. F. Stone's Newsletter* he characterized in several letters to me as his life-line.

**Wilkes:** What was the quality of his mind, what was this need . . . you know here was a man who had gone away from the world, ostensibly to be alone with his God and yet it seems like he was always reaching over the wall to pluck a document . . . it's a contradiction isn't it?

**Ferry:** Yes, his was as capacious a mind as I've ever encountered, I believe. He took everything in, he brought it in to himself, he'd fit it together and somehow it came out always in an orderly way. It was a good thing that he chose the essay as his way of dealing with the world, and that was purely adventitious, because he didn't have much time to write. He was a monk and he just had little chunks of time to write and the essays were composed during those little pieces of time he had.

**Wilkes:** How do you recall him? What kind of a friend was he?

**Ferry:** Oh my . . . Very hard to describe . . . It was a friendship I never wholly understood myself. I didn't have much to offer him – but we did have things that we were deeply concerned about just as human beings, not as a member of a Center or he even as a member of the community at Gethsemani. And I suppose it's our mutual concern with these things that was at the bottom of it. But beside that there were many other things. He was merry; he was very good company. His language was lively, and abrupt. He saw the world with, first of all, charity and, second of all, wisdom, and third of all, with a sort of irony that didn't pervade everything but it prevented him from very wild swings, it always seemed to me. And you could see it in his writing sometimes, you can see it in his letters where, after carrying on for a long while about, let us say, the then-Catholic view of the development of weapons, he would say, "Now I'm getting strident, I'm beginning to sound like the opposition. I'm probably close to sin in this and just take it as read,

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4. Isidor Feinstein Stone (1907-1989) was an American investigative journalist who self-published a newsletter, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*, which, among other issues, campaigned against racial discrimination and criticized the U.S. war in Vietnam.

that I'm qualifying all I've written above." And, since I regard the U.S. mail as the great adventure of my life, our friendship really prospered because he felt that way too. After all this was his connection with the world.

**Wilkes:** I've often heard that Merton was a man with a good mind but sometimes an impatient mind and he did not suffer fools lightly. Did you ever feel like a fool in his presence . . . would he ever make a person feel like that if they didn't have the hardware that he did?

**Ferry:** I didn't have the hardware that he did and he suffered me; he never made me feel as if I was foolish or as if I was dumb. It wasn't that. I must say I think I've made my friendship with him sound as if it were some sort of exclusive thing, something that ran between him and me alone. This is not so. I'm sure that this was a quality that he had with most people. I know a good many of the people who knew him well and they all felt the same affection, they all felt the same sort of universal bond, because it was that with the people whom he knew. Funny thing in a monk. Well, it did strike me as unusual that he should have this effect, that he should be so outgoing. He was not reserved in the slightest. Although he aspired toward the solitary life he was a gregarious man, on the few times when he was permitted to be gregarious. I think, when you ask about whether he was impatient and didn't suffer fools gladly, he had his problems in the monastery. He had his problems with the restrictions. When I asked him once about his vows, this was at one of the points when he was having some difficulty with his superiors on getting things published, he said, "Well, there are three you know. Poverty – that's a cinch, that's no trouble. There's chastity – well, that takes a little getting used to but that's manageable. Obedience, that's the bugger." And he did have his problems on quite a considerable order for two or three years during the early sixties, I'd say roughly from 1962 to 1964, and getting permission to publish things; one or two of his books were just stopped in their tracks.

**Wilkes:** Did he ever tell you specifically who was putting the pressure on him?

**Ferry:** Well, he never quite knew. He knew it came from someone beyond. The pressure came, of course, from Dom James but not from Dom James alone; it came from some place above. His

understanding of it, which he never investigated very carefully himself, was that it started with the higher-ups in Washington. Yes, he always said Washington. But he was referring to ecclesiastical higher-ups. And he said that he was aware that a lot of commotion had been stirred up by some of the things that he had been writing about, war and peace, and pacifism and the duties of Christians, and so on in various periodicals. However he never investigated it further himself. His letters have many statements, "I'm not going to go any further, it will not do any good, it will just cause a commotion that won't be good for anybody concerned including the Church."

**Wilkes:** Do you respect a man . . . your kind of a fighter and he chose not to fight?

**Ferry:** Well, he knew when he was licked. This was a prudential judgment; he wasn't backing off; he just said this too will pass, as it did pass, and all of the materials which he was so concerned about getting out during the sixties have appeared and they have been just as worthy when they appeared later. He was right; these matters will pass.

**Wilkes:** He had a longer view, didn't he, Ping? He somehow sensed it . . . that he wasn't going to fight every road block, was he?

**Ferry:** Yes, I would say that that's what finally prevailed. There was a lot of impatience, and a lot of huffing and puffing on his part about this; he didn't like it one bit. Not because he was looking for fame, but because he felt that there wasn't any adequate criticism from the point of view of someone with his base. There was criticism. By this time the first forays into Vietnam were being made, and he was appalled by the kind of conversation that was going on in Catholic circles around the just war issue and the use of the H Bomb. He had written a great deal about it and it was this stuff that was squelched. Of course it came out later, in various forms, and it was equally applicable. I don't know if that's the long view or not; he wasn't very content with the long view, he just knew that he didn't have any recourse without . . . and it wouldn't do any good.

**Wilkes:** What do you think of the roots of both his views on racism, war and bombs – where did all this come from in him? Do you know?

**Ferry:** He didn't know himself. I asked him that once, about the

roots. I couldn't trace my own very well, and I asked him whether he could trace the roots of his concern with race, war, technology, with education, with moral development, all of these subjects, where did they all come from? He said, "Well, you have to separate them out." He said, "I felt this way about race and wars as long as I've been a religious man," or something like that. But he never had any further explanation. That's a hard thing to trace back; some people can do it, they can trace it to their parents. He didn't blame it on, or give anybody credit or blame for his attitudes; he just accepted it.

**Wilkes:** Technology and machines come up in his writing all the time – what was so horrible to him about the use of machinery and technology?

**Ferry:** Well, it was a concern that the machines were going to take over, the concern of dehumanization, and he was quite right. That's another thing that brought us together. I wrote a good deal about that myself in those days. And we are seeing it now. I think we are seeing developments that were pretty clear to him, certainly clear to a few of us writing about these things in the '60s. The developments in higher technology, not only the robotization of factories, but the fact that the machines are taking over the office, the machines are taking over the whole society. Computers have become an intrinsic part of the schools, now they are making their way into the homes. He saw a whole change from a society based on humane values to one based on efficiency, the ideal of efficiency. And he wrote about it, and he was very good at it too.

**Wilkes:** When I read your letters and I read some of his stuff, he seemed to know in advance a year or two – he talked about the blacks, the revolution, Kennedy being marked for assassination. To what do you attribute his forecasting of events?

**Ferry:** Well, he was an exceptionally sensitive man, as well as an exceptionally religious man. But you know, that didn't require a great deal of forecasting, those things that you are talking about; the race situation was barely under the blanket, it was peeking forth every place and he noticed it peeking forth. That's more than you can say for most of our civic leaders and political leaders. The same thing is true of his attitude about the bomb; he saw the consequence of the bomb very clearly. When he was assembling a

book, an anthology that finally appeared as *Breakthrough to Peace*,<sup>5</sup> he gave pride of place to Lewis Mumford's piece in which he made that great statement, "Gentlemen you are mad," addressing our leaders, talking about the bomb.

**Wilkes:** If we would stop the interview now, we would find that there was this great intellectual conversation going back and forth between Ping Ferry and Thomas Merton. Did you ever have a can of beer with him . . . was there another side?

**Ferry:** I had a can of beer with Tom the first time, the first day that I met him. He said, "I can't see you right after breakfast but I will meet you about 11:00 a.m." as I recall. "Come to the back gate and bring some beer, and a couple of sandwiches, and we'll go off some place and take some pictures and sit and talk." Beer was an indispensable ingredient of our meetings at Gethsemani. I soon learned that the way to the back gate was the proper way to meet Tom and that the six-pack of beer was expected by both of us.

**Wilkes:** Ping Ferry as bootlegger – tell us about those days and the role you had?

**Ferry:** Well, when the curtain came down on Tom's literary efforts, when he couldn't publish officially, it made quite a change in my life, because he asked me, and I suppose others, to in effect be a bootlegger for him. The statement that he could not publish, ran only against magazine articles, books and such things. What he was allowed to do is send around mimeographed copies and at that point, as at most points in Tom's life, he was producing essays at, it sometimes seemed to me, about the rate of one a day. And it was the understanding that I would take these mimeographed copies and distribute them to a list – lists in fact. He furnished me with a list and I had a good many lists of my own to furnish with this bootleg copy. Some of it crept into print; none of it caused him any trouble because it was understood that this would happen once in a while. He warned me against printing it without permission, but he didn't warn me very hard.

**Wilkes:** He seemed like a man bursting to get his ideas out.

**Ferry:** Oh yes, oh yes. Perhaps James Laughlin has told you about the immense amount of stuff that was found under his cot, his bed,

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5. Thomas Merton, ed., *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination* (New York: New Directions, 1962).



in the hermitage after he died. An immense amount of material was found in a whole gang of beer cartons under his bed in the monastery. The picture of Tom Merton by many of the Catholics who became members of the faith because of Tom, is one of a man who wrote mainly books that are marvelously affecting, marvelously instructive, and of a very solemn and profound religious importance. I didn't see very much of that; I saw the other side. I saw not only the concerned citizen, the beer-drinking good fellow out taking pictures of barns and cemeteries and roots and things like that; a man who liked to walk in the woods and talk; a man who was furious with the way the world was going and couldn't wait to tell people of his fury. Every author, you know, wants to leave his print on the world someplace, that's what authors are for, and to have all of this stuff coming out of that typewriter day, after day, after day, and not to be able to do anything with it – at this point here I was at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions with a red hot Xerox machine at my beck and call and people to stuff these things in envelopes, and people to put the names on those lists on the envelopes and shove them in the mail. Well, this heightened our relationship quite a great deal.

**Wilkes:** Over this period of time between 1961 when you first met and 1968 when he died what did you see happening to him in his own growth, his own maturing as a person? What was happening during those years?

**Ferry:** One of the things that was happening, of course, during this period, was his interest in mysticism; his interest in the mystical experience heightened a great deal. It was during this period that he put out *Chuang Tzu*;<sup>6</sup> I don't know whether he saw Daisetz Suzuki at this point,<sup>7</sup> if not just before it. It's what really led him into this very, very deep concern, and there was only so much he could do at Gethsemani. At that point he had a reason – not just curiosity, not just impatience – a real reason to get out of the monastery and he was headed to the Far East. That was one part of the development, and a very important one. Moreover, he was seeing the whole monastic vocation in a different light. He began

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6. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

7. Merton's visit to Suzuki at Columbia University was in June 1964; see Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 114-17.

to write about it, saying the old ways are not necessarily the permanent ways. He sent me papers he wrote on it and it's nothing that I ever even discussed with him; this was out of my line of country. He was expanding all the time, and he was more and more eager – he saw really no good reason any longer why he should stay at Gethsemani year after year without ever getting out. He petitioned Dom James in vain. I tried to get him out several times. I had my particular standing with Dom James. He was very nice to me and I liked the abbot, although I didn't agree with him about anything, or he with me, but we got along very well. I tried to get around him several ways. I got up a pretty special invitation from the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions for Merton to visit us in California. And that flopped. He was invited to take part in a very large convocation on *Pacem in Terris* in New York, which I organized, in '65 or '66, and he was to play a prominent role, and he thought that was a very funny idea. He knew he would never get to go, but he encouraged me to send the invitation along.

**Wilkes:** Had Thomas Merton outgrown Gethsemani? Had it served its purpose in his life?

**Ferry:** I don't think so. I don't think that Tom ever outgrew Gethsemani. He said to me what he said to everyone else, "I'm always going to be a monk of Gethsemani." He said that even in the letters that he wrote me, one as I recall from Calcutta, one from Anchorage – "I'm looking for a hermitage someplace along the West Coast, and I hope to spend a good deal of time, perhaps in Siam, perhaps in Japan in a monastery there. I gotta get deeper into this Zen stuff. I don't understand it as I should."

**Wilkes:** Let's talk just a little bit about the relationship with the young woman who will not be identified by occupation, by name or any other thing. To you, what was the quality of that, what did he tell you about it, or what did he feel about it, what did it mean to him?

**Ferry:** Tom Merton called me up once, and very rarely did he call me. He asked me to come, quite soon, as soon as I could to the monastery – he had something to talk to me about. When was this? – '67 – '66, '67? – I've forgotten the time. And he said, "bring a lot of change – bring a big pocketful of change." I couldn't imagine what this was all about. We arranged to meet. And he came out of the hermitage, walked down to the back gate where I was waiting

dutifully with a couple of hamburgers and a six-pack. And he said, "I've got to make some phone calls." And he told me in the car going over that he wanted to call a woman he had met recently. He said, "I'm just terribly taken by her." No such thing had ever entered our conversation before. I was really flabbergasted by this. And I said, "Well, what's all this money for?" He said, "I gotta make a phone call." I said, "Well, you don't need \$5.00 in change," which is what I had in my pocket. He said, "Maybe I will. We've gotta get a long way away from the monastery. I can't be seen making a phone call any place around the monastery." And on the way he told me he'd just been very attracted to this woman. And that's what he'd called me to talk about. Well, I won't make too long a story of this; we did go about twelve miles away, and we stopped at a gas station which had one of those kiosks outside, and nearby a picnic table where we put down the Oly<sup>8</sup> or whatever beer we were drinking. And he rushed in and came back. The line was busy or something. Anyway, we stayed there for two or three hours, and he couldn't get through. I thought this was really quite funny and he saw I was laughing.

**Wilkes:** Ok, we're at the famous service station, and the Oly is getting warm, and then what happened?

**Ferry:** It was very uncomfortable; we were out in the sun, quite hot. And Tom by this time wasn't wearing his robe, of course, he was wearing jeans. And he rushed back and forth, and it was just like any man exasperated – he couldn't get hold of his girl. But this was Tom Merton, and I thought this was quite funny. And he saw the funny part of it, but he said, "It isn't funny, I've got to talk to you about this, but I've got to get this call through first." Well it took quite a long while, and he finally gave up. I can't tell you exactly why. So we went off and sat and talked. And he told me all the circumstances. I sympathized with him, very much. And it was a serious talk. But there's one very serious proposal that he made that cannot be regarded very seriously today, but he said, "What I want to do is go away with this woman for a month. Just want to go away with her for a month. What do you think of that?" And I said, "Tom, are you out of your mind?" "Well," he said, "what's wrong with it?" I said, "What do your superiors have to say about this?" He said, "Well, I don't think I'd consult them very much,"

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8. "Oly" or "Little Oly" was a reference to a canned beer introduced by the Olympia Brewing Company in 1962.

and he said, "See I could do this." I said, "You couldn't do it." He said, "There wouldn't be any publicity about it." And I said, "There wouldn't be any publicity? You'd just disappear from the monastery, and this woman would just disappear from wherever she comes from, and the world would pay no attention to this?" He said, "You think there'd be any publicity?" And I said, "I'm sure there would, I am absolutely sure." "Well," he said, "that isn't what I wanted to hear." He says, "Is there any way of handling it? Do you suppose there's any way of handling it?" And I said, "I don't think there's any way of handling it and on this I'm going to fail you because if there were a way of handling it, I wouldn't help you. Because I think this is a mistake. I'm not being moral about it, I think it's just a big mistake." Well we talked about it a good deal more and he said, "You've given me a lot to think about," and we went back, and before we got to the monastery he said, "Look, here are two telephone numbers. Will you try to get through for me and pass on a message?" And I said, "I don't think I can even do that, I'm afraid. I'm afraid I can't even do that. I don't mind being mixed up in something I believe in, but I really don't believe in this very much." And I left the next day. We had about two hours together, and the only thing that was said that next day was, "Thanks for the conversation yesterday. I got hold of her this morning. Thank you." And that was all that was said. I know how it all came out. But I'm never quite sure of the time, or how he settled with himself. All I know is that this woman, whoever she was, was a remarkably sensitive, terribly nice person. She managed all her side of this very well. I'm sure she did nothing to bring this on, so to speak.

**Wilkes:** We know about his Columbia days – he had no shortage of female companions and contact. Why do think this happened to him at that time of his life?

**Ferry:** Well, that's part of the circumstances I think. He was sick you know, he was sick, and I think he was vulnerable. And his defenses were down a little and he never referred to it after that. I saw him, you know, a good many times after that, and we spent a lot of time together out on the coast. And the matter was never mentioned by me or anybody else.

**Wilkes:** He loved her. He loved this woman?

**Ferry:** Yes. He did.

**Wilkes:** How excited was Merton about his Asian trip, tell me?

**Ferry:** Oh, yes. Can anybody blame him? Tom was like a child on his first trip to Disneyland when I met him. He'd been out for some time. He had stopped in Arizona [*sic*] and he made a trip to Alaska before he came to Santa Barbara where he stayed for two or three days. But he was at last on the last leg of the great adventure. And he had no commitments as he had had in Alaska or as he had in Arizona, to appear here and there. He had a sort of date with some nuns up at the Redwoods monastery, but his days were clear. And he was just full, just full of a sort of quiet joy. He smiled a great deal, laughed a great deal, and poked around. We had about an almost full day in Santa Barbara before I took him to the Center and had a meeting at our house of a lot of Merton Catholics. (You know, there's a cluster of Merton Catholics any place you go in the United States, and we had our full share.) And he was just sort of disengaged in a way that I'd never seen before. It was great. This didn't last. As soon as we started up the coast, he began to think of a lot of things. I didn't realize at the time, I knew he was preparing in his mind for Bangkok and Japan because he was going out to meet his peers in the mysticism business, and he was very anxious to present all the ideas he had. But he was busy writing. I was aware that he was writing, because he told me he was keeping a journal of the trip, but what I didn't know was that he was keeping two journals – a public journal which he told me about and a private journal which he didn't tell me, or anybody else, about. So when we left for San Francisco, we were on the first stage of what was to be a search for a hermitage for him. He had an idea that perhaps when he came back he would find a hermitage perched high above the Pacific Ocean. He even had a general idea where it might be, because he was a prudent man. He thought it might be some place up there near those nuns at the Redwoods monastery. It's in a remote part of California and the coast is rough, and only about twenty miles from the Redwoods monastery. He talked about that a good deal. And, of course, the nuns would be the ravens who fed him. They were the people who were connected to the grocery store. He wrote, you know, he put this down. He was figuring this thing out pretty well. So, all the way up the coast we looked for things, we looked along the Big Sur coast. We went up into the mountains at one point at Santa Lucia, a mile or two, to see what that looked like and that wasn't quite right, and we

went on and on and finally got to the Redwoods monastery and stayed there two or three days. I drove him across the twenty miles of the worst road in northern California to get out to the coast. He couldn't wait to get there because this is what he had his mind set on and here he was, and here were all these lovely Belgian or French nuns who were making a big fuss about him. And he liked them and oh, there was just a lovely feeling around the place. And now we were going out to find a place on the bluff for him. We got out there after 20 miles, took about two and a half hours. It was just dreadful. And we got out of the car, and there was an open spot where the road ended, the trace ended. And we got out of the car and walked over to the bluff and here was this great Pacific in front of us. We looked down off the bluff and there was condominiums and golf courses, and restaurants being constructed right down below this bluff. Nobody told us about it at the monastery. I'd never have gone up there if I'd known it.

**Wilkes:** What was the look on his face?

**Ferry:** The look on his face was he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Ah," he said, "let's go back. This isn't the place." And that was about all of that. I think everything else after that, he was pretty dispirited. We did get up into Oregon. We went over to take a look at the Rogue River valley and drove up the coast a bit, but that's a pretty highly populated thing, and anyway, by this time, he'd given up. He would look back and, he had a place, you know. He had a place sort of figured out in Alaska.

**Wilkes:** Ping, I'd like you to go back to the day in 1968, and wherever you were when you read in the paper or heard of what had happened in Bangkok?

**Ferry:** I'd been on vacation in Mexico with my wife. I drove up to Tijuana, on the way back to Santa Barbara. That was the first time I had been able to get to a phone; we were away from phones. And I called my office to see what had been happening. I hadn't spoken to anyone there for ten days. And then my secretary got on the phone and she said, "The only important thing that's happened is that Tom Merton is dead, died in Bangkok." I couldn't believe it. I said, "You sure? Where did you get the information?" She said, "Well, it just happened. I just got a call from the monastery and they'd like to talk to you." I didn't believe it. I thought she'd got things screwed up. So I had the phone number, I called up and

sure enough, that was it. And I don't remember much after that. I drove back. I couldn't believe it. You can believe most deaths, but I couldn't believe that this man, right at the point when he was reaching really the summit of his aspiration which was really to find himself, as he would say, "find myself in God," in the circumstances that he had so devoutly hoped for for so many years – bang, that was the end of it. For some reason, I don't remember who answered the phone – it wasn't Brother Patrick Hart – somebody else answered the phone. They were very much broken up and told me there were some mysterious circumstances. And there were at that time; nobody quite knew what had happened. It was quite a long while before anybody really accepted that this was just an accident. Which I do. But I didn't for some time. But it was, you know. This left a hole in the lives of many people, never to be filled. That's what I remember. That's what happened. And I've been back to Gethsemani only once. I didn't go back for the funeral. I went back just to say hello to a few people. I only stayed there an hour, looked at his grave and went away. There've been a few great men in my life – three or four maybe – and he's one of them.