

An Interview with James Laughlin about Thomas Merton

Conducted by Paul Wilkes, March 18, 1983¹

Transcribed and edited by Paul M. Pearson

Paul Wilkes: Why don't we begin with your describing your first contact with either Thomas Merton or Thomas Merton's words.

James Laughlin: Well, the first contact with his words came through Mark Van Doren and that would have been sometime, I think, in the very late thirties or the early forties and at that time I had been publishing my *New Directions* books for perhaps four or five years. And I had been a friend of Mark Van Doren who was one of the greatest teachers we have ever had in this country and he was a professor of literature at Columbia. I'd been a friend because he lives just over the mountain from where we are now talking² and he of course was one of Thomas Merton's principal professors at Columbia and there was a deep friendship between them. Tom, by then, was down in the monastery and he was continuing to write poetry. He had written poetry since he was quite young. His work at that time was chiefly religious in character because that was about all that the abbot wanted him to write. But he sent a group of these poems—there were thirty poems to be exact—up to Van Doren asking for his advice and criticism. Van Doren liked them very much and thought of me as a possible publisher because I was interested in poetry and I had just done a pamphlet of Van Doren's work a little bit earlier. He sent them to me and I liked them immediately. I thought this was a very exciting and fresh talent.

PW: How did Mark Van Doren recommended this young Trappist poet to you?

JL: Mark Van Doren said he thought this was a very promising poet, that he had a lot of talent, and that he had deep spiritual feeling, and he said that he thought that this was someone I would probably not find out about in the normal course of business, which was certainly true. As I have said, I liked these poems very much; there was a freshness there, there was a

1. 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* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 3-13.

2. Laughlin's home, "Meadow House," was just outside Norfolk, Connecticut.

liveliness, there was kind of a verbal sprightliness that was very attractive to me, and they were not like anything that any of the other New Directions poets were writing. There was almost an ingenuous character about them which was very appealing.

PW: You're not an especially religious man—why did they strike you?

JL: It wasn't the Catholic message, which in those early poems was quite strong—I mean there were poems about the night the monastery barn burned up or the portrait of the Virgin in the cloister—I mean this sort of thing didn't really move me very much. What I liked was his imagery and the way he would take a subject like that and then carry it into other metaphors so to speak, and make it colorful and interesting so that I as a heretic, a benighted Calvinist, was able to get some feeling as I never had before of what the Catholic faith was about.

PW: Then came the day when you saw this man for the first time in person—what did you expect to see and what did you see?

JL: When I first met Merton I went down after we had published his first book *Thirty Poems*³ for him and we corresponded quite a lot and talked about other books that he might write. The abbot invited me to come down to Gethsemani in Kentucky to visit him. This was a very novel experience for me, going into a monastery which, if I followed the precepts of my mother, I would have considered practically a place of the devil. It wasn't at all, it was a wonderful place. It was full of fun and good feeling. I had expected in Merton to meet a somber-faced monk who strode silently through the cloister and into the church muttering prayers under his breath. It wasn't like that at all! From the moment I first came to the monastery gate and was greeted by a very jolly brother gate-keeper I saw that I had been completely misinformed about monasteries; this was a very happy place and Tom Merton was very happy. He was—I suppose this is a word which one may not use anymore—but he was gay, that is to say he had a wonderful gaiety about himself and about life.

PW: How would you express that—I mean what was the quality of it? How did his face look, how did he move?

JL: He wasn't the handsomest man but he was nice looking and he had this wonderful smile and a lovely laugh and he was smiling most of the time. And what I liked about him was his capacity to put himself immediately in touch with you. I mean, when I got down there he was asking me all sorts of questions about what I was doing, and what my background

3. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944).

was like, and what I had been involved with in the publishing business. Tom was interested in everything; there was practically no subject at all which he didn't want to know about. He was bubbling with this wonderful enthusiasm. One of the problems, of course, was that he bubbled so much. Not in any stupid or foolish way. Tom would arrive in my cell—he had put me up in the guest house at the monastery—at six o'clock in the morning when I was just about getting my eyes open, with a green sack full of books and all sorts of notes and things that he had thought about during the night that he wanted to discuss with me, and this would go on really all during the day. His correspondence in the archive at Bellarmine shows that he was corresponding with almost every kind of person that you can think of all over the country and even abroad. He would correspond with the young people, young beats and hippies. He would correspond with them about jazz and about all sorts of these subjects. As well he would try to help them solve their spiritual problems.

PW: Let's move to *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁴ When that came out you were a very established publisher at the time; I'm wondering, why was that book such a phenomenal success at that time? It went onto the best seller list—what did it have?

JL: I would say that *The Seven Storey Mountain* had something to say that people were at that moment in our social history ready to hear. It presented an answer to spiritual problems that many people, particularly young people who were upset by the way things were going in the country, who were upset by the threat of the atomic holocaust and all the rest of it, they wanted to hear that and they liked the way Merton put it, so simply and so directly.

PW: What was he saying and what were they hearing from him? What was his message?

JL: Well, at that time, of course, his message was very different from what it later became. Let's see, it would have been twenty years later, he was writing much more as the French would say, *au point*. Later on he was responding directly to Vietnam and the Pentagon and all those things. At that early time, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he was responding in personal terms to a kind of spiritual angst, a kind of a spiritual doubt which so many of the young people had. That was his appeal. And it was all done so gently and without any proselytizing. That's the thing that always interested me about Tom. In all the years that I knew him he never tried to convert me to Catholicism, never once did he ever try. If I wanted

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

to ask him a question, and often I did about Catholic doctrine, he would give me a good short answer, but never once was there any attempt to sell me on Catholicism.

PW: That point is very interesting because here was a man who did in fact convert many—millions, hundreds, thousands—and yet never tried to do it in person. How do you reconcile those two things? He would write to your soul but not talk to you?

JL: Well, he wrote what was in his heart and his mind. The things that he felt he wanted to say and also what God wanted him to say. I mean this comes out in his journals, the private journals which are at Bellarmine, which haven't been published yet. In those journals you find some wonderful little [passages], written almost as dialogues where he talks to God and asks God whether he is doing the right thing, and asks for guidance so that he will do better as a writer. Now he doesn't put this in terms of, you know, buying more recruits for the Pope. He puts it, in the sense of, is he communicating to others as it is his desire and his duty to communicate.

PW: Do you think he was a God-inspired man . . . could we say that about Thomas Merton?

JL: Yes, I would say so.

PW: Returning to *The Seven Storey Mountain* and talk within the publishing industry . . .

JL: I think that everybody in the publishing industry was quite amazed that the book had done as well as it did do, and of course it became a great best-seller and has been translated into languages all over the world. I did not publish *The Seven Storey Mountain* for an interesting reason. Tom's agent, Naomi Burton, sent in the manuscript just as I was going off skiing and I didn't think it would make good reading in the mountains so I left it on my desk in New York and told Tom that I would read it when I got home. Well, Tom became a little impatient over that, because I think he realized that he'd written a very important book and so he sent to, I guess it was Bob Giroux then, his old friend from Columbia days at Harcourt, Brace and they published it. But I've always thought that this was really a very good thing for Tom and all concerned because New Directions was a terribly small press in those days and we had almost no promotional facilities, we had very few salesmen and I'm afraid that if we had done the book it simply wouldn't have gotten around and wouldn't have been seen.⁵ But, being done by a big firm like Harcourt, it was beautifully

5. This insight is borne out by the *New York Times* Best Seller list for 1949. After

promoted and did get around and had this chance and became a great best-seller so that overnight Tom was famous. It was sort of like what happened to Tennessee Williams the morning after *The Glass Menagerie* was published—suddenly he was famous. And Tom was famous.

PW: Within the publishing industry what was the talk? I mean was it utter amazement or what at the success of this book?

JL: The way *The Seven Storey Mountain* became a bestseller, I don't think it was utter amazement in the publishing industry. I think there was amazement. I'm sure if one looked up the old records at Harcourt, Brace you would find that the first printing was a small one because they simply did not anticipate, they hadn't you know, tested the water, they didn't realize that there was this hunger for a book of what you might call self-redemption, or finding one's way on life's path in a difficult ambience, or however you want to put it.

PW: We are going to deal with two things now; one is his growth as a writer, and then as a poet. As a writer was *The Seven Storey Mountain*, as you look back on it, kind of a green book? It seems a little too effervescent or something as I read it now. I read it twenty years ago. How do you feel about it? Was this a book that was good in its time and stayed there and the beat went on from it, or is it a classic that will go on forever?

JL: I think that *The Seven Storey Mountain* is certainly a classic. Whether it is a literary classic of the same level say, as *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, or something of that kind, I can't judge, and only time can judge it. There are faults in the book. There are points where it becomes a little bit preachy, which I just skip when I reread it. What is good is his story—the story of his life, of his heart, of his mind. And this is told vividly and compactly and effectively. And I think that's what put the book across. Now you ask whether *The Seven Storey Mountain* was a “green” book—I don't know quite what you mean by a “green” book. It certainly had, as I say, these little faults. But his writing took off and grew from that point. One might say that *The Seven Storey Mountain* is in some respects slightly undisciplined. Later, in his later books, particularly in the journal books, which came after, he disciplined himself a bit more, and held

entering the list in December 1948 *The Seven Storey Mountain* would remain on the list for every single week of 1949 and into 1950. *The Waters of Siloe*, also published by Harcourt, Brace, would enter the list at the beginning of October 1949 and remain on it for the rest of the year, spending three weeks in second position. In comparison, *Seeds of Contemplation*, published by New Directions, would only spend two weeks on the list, reaching only fourteenth place.

closely to the track. He also gained greatly in writing style. Merton was a natural writer. He had written at Columbia, and perhaps even before that. I have read the dissertation which he wrote at Columbia for his Master's degree, an essay on Blake.⁶ It's very well written, very well thought out. There's a control of language there. There's a knowledge of what he is doing with language and what he wants to do. Now, this grew consistently throughout his life—what one would call his professionalism, his craft as a writer grew continually. And he got better and better as he went on. And that was why I felt it was so, just tragic, and I couldn't understand it, when he died as young as he did, because his powers were increasing all the time. And if he'd only lived, he would have written more really great books. But, God's will . . .

PW: These private journals that you talked about—why aren't they published and what's their special quality?⁷

JL: Tom's private journals—and I should say, he did two kinds of journals. He was a prodigious worker, and a very fast writer. And at any time you would find—when I would go down there to visit him—that he'd be working on two sets of journals. One would be the journals which would later be made into books, with a good deal of cutting and polishing, and then the others were these private journals which he kept in big, as I remember, they were black ledgers. And these were his very personal thoughts, like his diary. The public journals were written for publication, the private journals were written just for his own dialogue with himself.

6. "Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation" (1939), in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 385-453.

7. In Merton's Legacy Trust agreement he instructed his Trustees that "after the completion of my biography . . . and after twenty-five years from the date of my death, the Trustees are to publish said holographic notebooks, journals and diaries in whole or in part, according to their judgment." Beginning in 1995, the private journals referred to here have now all been published: *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995); *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996); *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997); *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

The quality of them is, as I say, very free, very frank—he's often, quite often talking to God, and asking advice from God. He's often in them worrying about whether he is a good contemplative. More than that, he is worrying about when is he going to get a great mystical experience.

PW: Did he ever?

JL: He did. If you read the end of *The Asian Journal*, when he got to Polonnaruwa—which is that place in Ceylon⁸ where there are these enormous hundred-foot long reclining Buddhas—I think, if you read those pages in *The Asian Journal*, you will be convinced, as I was, that he had had his great mystical experience. Now, it's ironic that it was Buddhism, and the art of Buddhism, which brought him these experiences, and not something in the monastery or in the Catholic faith. But that's how things happen. And he was so ecumenical, you see, he was interested in all religions. He was interested even in Islam, and Sufism and all kinds of different religions. And to me it's rather beautiful that this great experience came to him as a result of his ecumenism, because he would never have gone to Ceylon unless he had read Buddhist texts at the monastery.

PW: What do you think the message is in that? You know, you talk about ecumenism, and usually you have the Protestant minister come to the Catholic Church, but this is really way out there. What do you think that means, that he had it within that whole other culture and experience that we don't really know much about?

JL: Well, I think it was several things. Merton had this mystical experience at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon, I think, because he had always been so open to spiritual forces of all kinds. In his readings, as you read the journals and other books, you see this constant openness to other traditions. And then, beyond that, it was simply that he had read a great many Buddhist texts. I mean, he knew the *Dhammapada*, the great Buddhist text, almost by heart—he was completely open to these things. And then, when he saw this place—I wish I had time to read to you just a paragraph or two from that part of *The Asian Journal*—because I can't begin to express what he told us happened to him with his beauty of phrase and his nobility of utterance. I mean it is simply a lovely passage where looking at these Buddhas in their massive tranquility, he felt that he had at last come to the place where time stopped. And he was a part of the larger spiritual universe. He felt that as he saw these figures. This is the beautiful passage

8. Upon renouncing its status as a British Dominion and becoming a republic in 1972 Ceylon became known as Sri Lanka.

from *The Asian Journal* where Merton talks about his mystic experience at Polonnaruwa in Ceylon:

I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass, wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great smiles. Huge and yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace not of emotional resignation but of Madhyamika, of sunyata, that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—*without refutation*—without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well-established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening. I was knocked over with a rush of relief and thankfulness at the *obvious* clarity of the figures, the clarity and fluidity of shape and line, the design of the monumental bodies composed into the rock shape and landscape, figure, rock and tree. And the sweep of bare rock sloping away on the other side of the hollow, where you can go back and see different aspects of the figures.

Lovely, isn't it?

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. The queer *evidence* of the reclining figure, the smile, the sad smile of Ananda⁹ standing with arms folded (much more “imperative” than Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa because completely simple and straightforward). The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don’t know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have

9. Merton was mostly likely following an older guide book which would have described the seven-meter-high standing image of the Buddha as an image of Ananda, the Buddha’s disciple, mourning the Buddha’s departure for Nirvana. But with more recent discoveries of other images with the same unusual arm positions, it is now generally accepted that this is also an image of the Buddha.

pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise. This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete. It says everything; it needs nothing. And because it needs nothing it can afford to be silent, unnoticed, undiscovered. It does not need to be discovered. It is we, Asians included, who need to discover it.¹⁰

Now there of course we have in Tom Merton's magnificent language—and with always his sense of the poetry of the language present—we have his statement of this very deep spiritual and aesthetic experience which occurred to him in Ceylon, and which I think profoundly altered the last parts of his life.

PW: Now you knew him as a man and a writer—what did it really mean to him? What really happened there?

JL: Well, he had, I'm convinced, a mystical experience. The sort of thing that other mystics have had—St. John of the Cross, Sister Teresa, the lady down in Spain—they all had these great mystical experiences, and other mystical writers in many faiths have had these experiences. It is an experience which unfortunately I never expect to have, where you suddenly lose your identity in the greater identity of the spiritual cosmos. And this can happen in any religion. It happens to Hindus, it happens to Buddhists, it happens in Islam, it can happen in any culture.

PW: It's interesting in his writings that he always said, "Don't seek that mystical experience; it will find you." Had he sought it do you think?

JL: Oh, I'm sure that he sought it. Every contemplative who prays a lot, who meditates a lot—that's what they are seeking. But I think if they are humble and they know the literature of mysticism, they will know that this is something you can't reach out and take. You can prepare for it—through many years you can prepare for it. After all, the Tibetan monk training to be a monk in his cave in Tibet, used to prostrate himself a hundred thousand times, a complete prostration, calling out "Om Mani Padme Hum," which means "the jewel at the heart of the lotus." And you can seek it, but you only get it if God or Buddha or whoever is the power, wants you to have it. I know that Tom wanted it, but he was also humble, and he knew his place, and he talked a great deal about grace. Grace is the Catholic term, I think, to describe when a person is granted this sort of illumination.

10. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233, 235-36.

PW: Throughout his life and in so many of the books, he writes of having come home. "I've found my home in Gethsemani." Tell us about Merton's continual coming home and never being home?

JL: Yes, Gethsemani was his home. You see, I think he'd lost all his family early, except for his grandparents. He'd had a good home with the grandparents in Long Island, but it wasn't quite the same thing as a final home, a place where you stay for the rest of your life. And that's what he wanted Gethsemani to be for him. And I remember I talked with him a few times about this when we were on my visits there; I would rent a car and the abbot would let him go off for the day, and we'd drive through the country, and talk about things, or take walks or go to visit some good friend of his. And I once asked him—Tom had been grouching a little bit, he could grouse—about the restrictions at the monastery, and how he disliked the cheese business, and how he disliked the junky stuff in the store which sold little crucifixes or rosaries to the tourists, and you know, he was grouching a bit about the monastery. And I said, "Well, Tom, if it gives you this much pain, why do you stay there? After all, you're a brilliant writer, you could go out in the world, you could still do your spiritual teaching, you'd be a very successful writer, why do you stay there?" And he said, "You don't understand—that's where I belong. That is my home." And even at the end, following later than that in his life, there were many times when he got annoyed with things at the monastery, with the conditions. I know that he used to complain a lot about all the conversation in the monastery. Now we think of the Trappists as not talking, but that isn't so, not necessarily so, as the song says. These Trappist monks, they talk sign language to each other, and they're going all day with this sign language, and he said he didn't want to be bothered with that. It was interfering with his meditation and his work, so that he wanted to get off and be a hermit. Of course, there's a curious contradiction there, kind of a dichotomy, or you might almost say a split personality, that this man was constantly wanting to be a hermit, to get further and further away from everything. At one time he tried to get to be a hermit down in, I think it was in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and he was corresponding with a bishop who had invited him to come down there. He was going to live in a cave with the ravens, you know, and administer to the poor Indians. Well, I just wonder if he had done that, how much he would have missed these interesting intellectual visits that he had from Catholic churchmen such as Maritain, and writers from all over the country who would come to see him. From people such as Nicanor Parra, the Chilean anti-poet. I don't think he would have stuck it out very long

if he were really a hermit. But this was a constant obsession with him and that's why after Father Flavian became abbot, and was more permissive in trips, he went out to California where he and Ping Ferry and his wife drove him around to see places there on the Redwoods shore where he might have a hermitage.

PW: We talked a bit about the changes in his life, and how at first he was very, very humble and then, as he became successful, there was a different Thomas Merton.

JL: There was a definite change in the, sort of the inner climate of Merton's life. When he first came to the monastery, he had all the proper attitudes of a postulant, and then as a novice, and then as a young priest. He was humble, he was obedient, he fully believed that whatever the abbot said was what he should do. But later on as he became more mature, in my view, and he had his success and realized his powers as a writer—you see, I don't think that early on he knew whether he was going to be a good writer or not. I think that he smelled in the success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, a certain element somehow of sensational publicity. You know, wicked young man runs off to monastery to save soul. But as he, with his other books, realized what he could do with his writing, this gave him more confidence to be himself. So that he was less willing to put up with restrictions, or some bishop writing in to the abbot and telling him what he could write and what he couldn't write. Now, this never took, at least with me, the form of vanity, or of arrogance. It was just a kind of an inner determination that he was going to, in his writings, work out what was still God's will, more than his will. As Merton matured and became more self-confident, there was—I wouldn't call it a personality change—it was rather a change in his adjustment to his surroundings and to life. He never became, to me at least, he never seemed vain, he never seemed arrogant; it was rather a change in his self-evaluation and how he would best work out, through his writings, what he had decided God wanted him to do. Now, here of course came up one of the considerable battles with the abbot. It was also my battle. That is, when Tom began to get interested in social conditions. You see, he was a leader in the non-segregation movement. He was a leader against the Vietnam War. I mean he was speaking for possibly, I don't know, hundreds of thousands, millions of Catholics, who didn't like the way things were going. He got interested in these movements. Well, then there was a big friction, because when he would write these articles attacking the Pentagon or something the Catholic bishops, who were not then like they are now—I mean now they are, you know, they've seen the light, and they're quite marvelous—they would write in to the abbot and say, "You must restrain this

man; he's a monk. All he's supposed to do is pray, and he has no business to be concerning himself with social movements and the Vietnam War" and so forth. And Tom didn't like this very much at all. I had, not an argument, but I just accosted the abbot one day as he was coming across the field, his robes were blowing in the wind, he looked very handsome and beautiful, he looked like something out of a Winslow Homer painting—and I said, "Father Abbot, could I have a word?" and he said, "Yes, James," and I said, "Father, now you've really got to let Tom"—Father Louis, I would have called him to the abbot—"you've got to let him go on being slightly political." And Dom James said to me: "James," he said, "you don't understand. Tom's work and the work of all of us monks is to pray, and our prayers will go up to heaven and God will hear them, and God will fix up the troubles in the world." Well, I was polite, and I didn't say the short word. I just said, "OK." But that was his problem, and you see the Catholic bishops did bring all this heat on the abbot, and so the abbot—they had quite a long discussion and Tom agreed—that he would stop attacking the Pentagon and stop this political writing. But of course he had a very ingenious way to get around this, which was that he didn't publish publicly, but he published privately. And there's a whole series of marvelous writings which are called the "Cold War Letters."¹¹ Now, these are letters on all these controversial subjects. And Tom would write these things, and then he would get his friends in the novitiate to type them out and mimeograph them and then he would send them to a large and increasingly growing mailing list of people all around the country who would get his views and his word on these subjects. So they had quite a circulation because people would quote from them, you see, and they would have an influence. But he did in the form, if not in the substance, he obeyed the rules.

PW: Why do you feel that his works, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, of course, being the beginning, touched and continue to touch people? What's the quality of it that you, as an editor, would see in them? Why did people keep reading him? What did he have?

JL: Well, once you've been bitten by Merton, you will go on reading him, and read everything you can—that's the secret. Now, how he actually did it, who knows? I mean, do any of us know what is the particular magic that a great or even a fine writer has? This is something that is combusting inside of him. And it is coming out in fine language, clear thought and persuasive communication. He is touching people's minds and hearts. Now, I can't analyze his works and tell you how he did it. If I did know

11. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

how he did it, I would write the same kind of books and become famous myself. But, this is something again that we get, or that we are born with, and then we can do it if we are writers.

PW: How would you place him in the writers of that mystical tradition—spiritual writers, social prophets—what is his place? What kind of company should he be in?

JL: Well, he comes out, let's see, he comes out of a long tradition of religious writers who were more than commentators. People who had something original and personal to say which raised them above the lump of just commentary writers about religion or theologians quibbling over this small point or that small point, whether the Athanasians were right, or whether the Albigensians were right, or that sort of thing. He belongs in a more personal tradition, and I would have to give you those names, I would have to go down and look at the shelf to pick them up again. Well one man that he liked very much was St. Clement of Alexandria. He translated him.¹² And it was that type of mystical theological writer who interested him. It isn't limited to the Catholic tradition. I mean, there are many in England, there are many mystical writers who were extremely powerful: George Herbert, for example, a poet, and there are a number of others. That is the tradition that he belongs in, and which he learned from, because he read all those people early on.

PW: At the end of his life you felt he was coming back to the world in some way. Tell us about what was happening in his own life and what that was about?

JL: Well, I would say that definitely with this change in self-confidence, there came a tendency to find out more about what was going on in the world. You see, in the early days, the only news of the world that the monks got from Dom James was at chapter in the early morning when Dom James would relay to them anything that he had heard over the radio, or read in the paper, that he thought was proper for them to hear. Well, this was not, shall we say, a complete journalistic coverage of the world situation. As he grew in self-confidence and grew in his interests of the other things that he wanted to know about, Tom went toward, what I would call a more open life. Now this was difficult, really until Dom Flavian became abbot—an old friend of Tom's who had similar views—who believed that the monks should know what was going on in the world and then should have some intellectual contact with what

12. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Protreptikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

good writers were reading.

PW: Tell us about the other Thomas Merton and being a friend?

JL: Thomas Merton was a wonderful friend. One reason was that he was truly interested in his friends and he would bring them out more than talk to them. He wasn't at all a lecture-y person in any way. I mean, he'd tell you something if you asked, but he really was interested in people. He was deeply interested in people. And I loved to go down there and visit him in the monastery because frankly, we just had such good times. And when I'd go down there I'd usually pick up a car, at the rental car at the Louisville Airport, and then I'd drive down, and the next day Father Abbot would have given him permission to go out with me for the day. Tom would usually start out very circumspectly; he would go into the old bishop's store room and he would find an old bishop's suit and he would put that on and he would exit from the monastery, so as not to shock the gate-keeper, looking very ecclesiastical. Then we would get out a few miles and he'd stop by the woods and he'd say, "Stop here"; then he would go into the woods and he would take off his bishop's suit and he would put on his blue jeans and his old sweater and his beret. And then we would head east, stopping, I must say, at a few beer parlors on the way, where Tom always was very popular with the local farmers. He knew how to talk to all kinds of people and they found him funny and they liked him. So we'd usually then head on over to Lexington where we would visit with and have lunch with his wonderful old friend, the great Austrian artist and philosopher, and the great hand-printer, Victor Hammer, and that was always a great occasion. Carolyn Hammer, Victor's American wife, would put on a superb little gourmet lunch for us and, again, there would be an excellent bottle of wine which Tom would down with evident relish and would never seem to feel any effects of it. I mean, I would walk out of the Hammers' barely able to stand up and Tom would stride ahead straight on the lawn. It was very curious—he had no allergy to alcohol. Then we would usually stop on our way back, we'd stop at other places, often at that beautiful Shakertown where he loved the old buildings and the old Shaker furniture and the stories about those people.

PW: Let's move to his poetry for a minute, which is something which is, of course, very close to your heart. Tell me about his growth as a poet, moving on up to that period when he really started talking about peace and justice in the world and stuff like that?

JL: I think there must have been earlier childhood poems that I haven't seen, and I think he also did some humorous writing for the *Columbia*

Spectator,¹³ I believe it was called, the magazine at Columbia College. He started writing poetry before he was converted to Catholicism, but it wasn't religious poetry. And then, after he got into the monastery, the only kind of poetry that the abbot wanted him to write, thought it proper for him to write, was religious poetry. Now, these early religious poems, as I've said earlier, are not quite my dish because, I suppose, just because I'm not a Catholic, and they were certainly not as good as somebody like George Herbert or somebody like Hopkins. But they have a lot of passion, a lot of feeling for what he is writing about. And of that period, I suppose, the most famous one and the most beautiful, is the poem in memory of his brother who was killed in the war.¹⁴ And this is a very beautiful and great poem by anybody's standards. However, later as he matured and became more secular in his interests, and as the censorship on him, or to put it rather, the direction on him, was diminished from on top, he began to write a different kind of poetry, which was more concerned with what was happening outside the monastery than what was happening inside the monastery and inside him. There is a profound and notable change in Merton's poetry about 1963 when his book *Emblems of a Season of Fury*¹⁵ was published. This was the first time he felt that he could write about social and political themes and get away with it. But in writing about these themes his treatment was always extremely metaphorical and extremely poetic. Now, there was one very great poem, it's a long poem, I can't read all of it, but I'd like to read a little bit of it for you. It is called "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces." Now, this is his poem about the German concentration camps and about the Holocaust. And it is written with a wonderful kind of ingenuous irony, such as he later used in his political poem "Original Child Bomb,"¹⁶ which was about the atom bomb. He's using a technique here which Pound used in his "mask form"¹⁷ where he is speaking through the mouth of one of the Nazi executioners in a concentration camp. This is the Nazi speaking:

13. Merton contributed a small number of news items to the *Columbia Spectator*; however, his humorous writing, including poetry, and his cartoons would appear in the *Columbia Jester*.

14. "For My Brother: Reported Missing in Action, 1943." *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 35-36; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" in the notes.

15. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963); subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" in the notes.

16. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962); CP 291-302.

17. In much lyric poetry the poem is in the voice of the author. With Pound's "mask form" the speaker is another character with whom the poet did not necessarily identify.

How we made them sleep and purified them

How we perfectly cleaned up the people and worked a big heater

I was the commander I made improvements and installed a guaranteed system taking account of human weakness I purified and I remained decent

How I commanded

I made cleaning appointments and then I made the travellers sleep and after that I made soap

I was born into a Catholic family but as these people were not going to need a priest I did not become a priest I installed a perfectly good machine it gave satisfaction to many

When trains arrived the soiled passengers received appointments for fun in the bathroom they did not guess

It was a very big bathroom for two thousand people it awaited arrival and they arrived safely

There would be an orchestra of merry widows not all the time much art

If they arrived at all they would be given a greeting card to send home taken care of with good jobs wishing you would come to our joke

Another improvement I made was I built the chambers for two thousand invitations at a time the naked votaries were disinfected with Zyklon B¹⁸

You see you get in there already a touch of what was to come later in the anti-poetry of *Cables to the Ace*¹⁹ and of *The Geography of Lograire*,²⁰ where you get the humor, and you get him suddenly throwing a word out saying that the prisoners in the concentration camp would write home to their families, invite them to come to their “joke.” This kind of black humor crops up consistently in his later work.

PW: Tell us a little about *The Geography of Lograire*.

JL: Yes, the transitional step between *Emblems* and *The Geography of Lograire* was the book *Cables to the Ace*. Now, here he was very much

18. *ESF* 43-47; *CP* 345-46.

19. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

20. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969); subsequent references will be cited as “GL” in the notes.

influenced²¹ by my friend, the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, known as the anti-poet, whom I took down to Gethsemani to meet Merton and they became great friends and corresponded. Now, I have never quite understood what Parra is talking about when he's an anti-poet because it sounds to me just like an ordinary vitriolic poem. But Merton was right on wavelength with him and [we see] the great influence of this chap Parra in the *Cables to the Ace*. But the poem of his which I find the greatest, and the most liberated, and the most extraordinary, is the first book of his long poem *The Geography of Lograire*. Now this was going to be his work in progress, it was going to be his *Cantos*, such as Pound wrote; it was going to be his *Paterson*, such as W. C. Williams wrote; and he expected to be working on it for the rest of his life and it might be a thousand pages long. The title *Lograire* is a code word that he made up. It comes of course from *Logos*, the Greek for "the word," the poet speaking. It comes also from Villon,²² the French poet's family name, *Des Loges*. It also comes out of Arthurian romance, where it might have been a mythical country in the Arthur legend. The geography is simply his mind. What he is going to tell us in this poem is everything that went on in the geography of his mind, everything that he had read, everything that he remembered, but all distilled into these marvelous, compact, almost symbolic poems. He only completed the one volume, of course, because he died. When he went off to Asia he left the first volume with me and he said, that if anything happens to me, I want you to publish this, and we did. I think it's a superb long poem. It's very varied in its content. He had read widely in history, in anthropology and all sorts of subjects. But the point is what he could do with this material, how he could shape it to his own ends, and the really great use that he made of parody, where he would parody some earlier writer. Or the use that he made with myth, when he would take anthropological myths, such as the stories about the cargo cults in Melanesia, and make marvelous, tight, little but rich poems about them. And I think that this poem will eventually be recognized as one of the great modern personal epics along with the *Cantos* and *Paterson*.

PW: As the last thing could we have a little reading from *The Geography of Lograire*?

21. In a June 1965 letter to Parra Merton writes, "you will find that before knowing your work I had written some antipoems, for example 'Chant to Be Used in Processions . . .'" (Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993] 213). This suggests that Merton's antipoetic style, certainly initially, developed independently of Parra's influence.

22. François Villon was born in Paris in 1431. He was banished from Paris in 1463 for brawling and never heard from again.

JL: Merton used parody in a very effective way in *The Geography of Lograire*. He used it for humor and he also used it for satirical comment and one of the funniest ones, I think, is a section of the poem about the old Mexican Indians which he based on the books of Covarrubias²³ mostly, and here he does something that was typical of him. In writing about these beautiful ladies in ancient Mexico he went to copies of *The New Yorker* magazine. I don't know how exactly *The New Yorker* magazine got into the monastery, but it must have, because I have checked through and I find that many of the lines in what I am going to read you I can find in old advertisements in *The New Yorker* for ladies' clothes, perfume and other female finery. So here's a little section from "The Ladies of Tlatilco":

The ladies of Tlatilco
 Wore nothing but turbans
 (Skirts only for a dance)
 A lock of hair over the eyes
 Held only by a garland
 Tassels and leaves
 They bleached their black hair
 With lime
 Like the Melanesians.

Feminine figurines with two heads or with four eyes and ears
 Two noses or doublemouth on the same head
 "Reminiscent of Picasso
 Perhaps connected with idea of twins."

A most provocative perfume
 Wicked wicked charms
 Natural spray dispenser
 A special extract
 For four-eyed ladies of fashion
 MY SIN
 "And my most wicked provocative lewd
 dusting-powder excitements."
 (Two noses on the same head)²⁴

Now, you see what he's doing there, is that he is playing off those wonderful one-eyed or two-eyed ladies of Picasso with the ads from *The New Yorker* magazine, and he was an expert at doing this. This is what we call,

23. Miguel Covarrubias [1904-1957], *Indian Art of Mexico and Central America* (New York: Knopf, 1957).

24. *GL* 28; *CP* 484.

in the beanery trade,²⁵ the juxtaposition of incongruities, but Merton does it with more humor than ever a Pound or Williams or any of the others did it with. This is one of Merton's funny poems—it's about the cheese business down at the monastery which he never liked very much. It's modeled, as you'll see, on Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees," and there's a very nice typographical touch, when he is spelling cheese in the title he has not an "S" but a dollar sign.

CHEE\$E

Joyce Killer-Diller

I think that we should never freeze
Such lively assets as our cheese:

The sucker's hungry mouth is pressed
Against the cheese's caraway breast

A cheese, whose scent like sweet perfume
Pervades the house through every room.

A cheese that may at Christmas wear
A suit of cellophane underwear,

Upon whose bosom is a label,
Whose habitat:—The Tower of Babel.

Poems are nought but warmed-up breeze,
Dollars are made by Trappist Cheese.²⁶

25. Laughlin referred to universities and colleges as "beaneries." Therefore "the beanery trade" would have referred to academe in general. I am grateful to Peggy Fox, former President of New Directions, for clarifying Laughlin's use of this term.

26. *CP* 799-800.