

More Than Scribe: James Laughlin, Thomas Merton and *The Asian Journal*

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James Laughlin was the founder of the New Directions Publishing Corporation that, by the time of Thomas Merton's death in 1968, had already published all of his poetry and many of his prose works. The role that Laughlin assumed in the case of *The Asian Journal* was far more than that of amanuensis, of scribe: in fact, his creative hand forged the text as it would be published. Each New Directions book includes the chaste notation, "published for James Laughlin"; but Laughlin would step in as editor or designer or publicist, or indeed any other role, whenever he thought it necessary. Given the chaotic state of the Asian travel writings handed over to Laughlin, this would prove his most intensive involvement on a Merton volume during their long association.

Before setting out on his Asian journey, Merton, Father Louis—Tom to his old friend, whom he called J—had told Laughlin that, in the unlikely event that anything catastrophic happened, any drafts and manuscripts written during the trip were to be handed over to him. When Merton was accidentally electrocuted outside Bangkok on December 10, his body was returned to America on a U.S. Air Force jet that also contained, ironically yet fittingly, the bodies of American service personnel killed in Vietnam, in a conflict that Father Louis had vigorously opposed. With his body came a small brown traveling case containing the notebooks and other papers that he had written on his trip. This case was turned over to J Laughlin.

Ordinarily, Laughlin was content to remain anonymously on the sideline, his work on a book unmentioned. But when Brother Patrick Hart, the editor of *The Other Side of the Mountain*, the seventh and final volume of Merton's *Journals*, which incorporates three previously published Merton texts, *Woods, Shore, Desert*,¹ *Thomas Merton in Alaska*² and *The Asian Journal*,³ mentioned Laughlin in what struck him as a bit too perfunctory a tribute, he was upset. Brother Patrick had written:

1. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert: A Notebook, May 1968*, ed. Joel Weishaus (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982).

2. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 1-36.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973); subsequent references will be cited as "*AJ*" parenthetically in the text.

“James Laughlin in particular must be singled out for a word of special thanks, since he did the lion’s share of the research and negotiations on the original manuscript of *The Asian Journal*.”⁴ To J, who had spent the better part of three years on the text, this seemed a very small portion indeed for the lion. His lifelong habit of self-deprecation and his modesty prevented a more forceful assertion of his claim on the final text, but to his then vice-president at New Directions and his literary executor, Peggy Fox, he typed out a crisp note on December 12, 1994, under the impression that *The Asian Journal* would become the entire seventh and final volume of the *Journals*. “I can’t stand in the way of this project,” he wrote in some distress, “but it is perhaps an opportunity to state my claim that I *wrote* the book, page by page, turning Tom’s jumbled notes into his style, doing the glossary and notes.” The vehemence of J’s claim of authorship arose in part because he felt that his work on *The Asian Journal* had been *the* major accomplishment of his entire literary career. “Perhaps I’m being petty,” he continued, “but it galls me that I’ve never had any recognition from Catholic academics, and precious little from Gethsemani.”⁵

It was not a case of mere petty professional jealousy on J’s part: it was as if his friendship with Tom had been somehow undervalued. And there was more to it than that. Laughlin had been devastated by Tom’s death, so much so that he had found himself unable to face his burial service at Gethsemani. Instead, he came to the monastery soon after it to hold his own private communion with the spirit of his friend. A lapsed Presbyterian, J had hitched his attempts to resolve his religious quest for salvation onto Tom’s faith, telling Father Louis of his own chronic doubts and seeking his advice on prayer and religious meditation.

In the traumatic weeks that followed, Dom Flavian Burns, the Abbot of Gethsemani, had Merton’s cassocks burned because he was afraid that relic hunters would break into the abbey. For J, the most bizarre happening was the appearance in his New York office of a wild-eyed woman who announced that Merton had been reborn as a *tulku*, a reincarnated master of Tibetan Buddhism, and that Laughlin must leave at once for Tibet to find the baby and bring him to America.

Much has been written about Merton’s supposed premonition of his death in Asia—“If I just die of amebic dysentery on the banks of the Ganges, that in itself would be superb,” Tom wrote gaily to J, adding as

4. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals*, vol. 7: 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) xi; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.

5. James Laughlin to Peggy L. Fox, December 12, 1994 (New Directions [ND] correspondence files).

an afterthought, “Though doubtless unpleasant.”⁶ Predictably, given the sensational aspect of his actual death, a quantum of conspiracy theories sprang up. But the circumstances of Merton’s life in the years and months preceding his journey point rather to his eagerness for new knowledge and new experiences than to a desire to escape from the Cistercians. His wish to study Asiatic modes of meditation had been given great impetus through his meeting in 1964 with the aged Zen philosopher Daisetz T. Suzuki,⁷ and their important collaboration, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*,⁸ had been published by New Directions in January, 1968. With his ever-increasing fame, the three years of Merton’s private hermitage on the grounds of Gethsemani had proved a disappointment when it came to solitude and meditation. Some of it was his fault: he found it difficult to refuse writing and speaking engagements, and his innate politeness made him susceptible to drop-in visitors who hiked in from the highway, and to the four college girls who came by appointment in a group to interview him (which led to beer, and a bottle of bourbon—probably Heaven Hill—bought by Father Louis) (see *OSM* 75-76 [April 6, 1968]). Then too, there was the noise problem: local hunters and gun enthusiasts had set up an impromptu shooting range at a lake adjacent to the abbey property, and his last journal records incessant barrages of gunfire, unsettling especially to pacifist Tom.

Finally, there was a real opportunity for him to break loose, to travel. Abbot James Fox had kept Merton on a short leash for two decades; now he was succeeded by Father Flavian Burns. Merton had campaigned for Father Flavian’s election—Father Louis had been afraid that his more conservative colleagues would never accept Father Flavian. “What a difference between Father Flavian, as abbot, and Dom James,” Merton wrote; “I get a real sense of openness. . . . One slowly comes back to life, with the realization that all things are possible” (*OSM* 139 [July 5, 1968]).

Suddenly so many ventures became possible: a hermitage in Alaska (the Bishop of Alaska offered help); meetings with Buddhists in Nepal, India, Thailand; even a visit to Merton’s elderly Aunt Kit in New Zealand. At the very outset of Tom’s excited speculation about attending a conference in Bangkok and then traveling widely in the Orient, a family

6. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 356 [September 5, 1968].

7. 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) 113-17.

8. See Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 99-138; see also Merton’s tribute, “D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work” (59-66).

tragedy occurred when Agnes Gertrude Merton—dear Aunt Kit who had knitted a sweater to keep her nephew warm—had drowned in the sinking of a huge ferry in Wellington Harbor. At length, Tom mused on the true nature of death, not a “comfortable” death with loved ones at the bedside, but death “naked and terrible,” making one “remember what death really is” (*OSM* 85 [April 25, 1968]).

If anything, Aunt Kit’s death gave Merton an enhanced urgency. The writing in his several trip notebooks shows his exuberance, his haste to get *something* down before the next set of rich impressions—or even his extinction—fell upon him. And therein lay the minefield that he was to leave for Laughlin to navigate. J would type to Anne McCormick, on the same day that he wrote to Peggy Fox of his claim of having authored *The Asian Journal*, that in his haste Tom “would lapse into a kind of shorthand in which [he] put down only nouns and verbs.” Then J added in longhand: “I rebuilt his style” (ND correspondence files). I might interject that from an early age J had been a natural literary chameleon: he met Gertrude Stein in 1934, stayed with her for eight days, and in his next several letters to his parents he imitated her style and diction perfectly. During the same period he was corresponding with Ezra Pound, and he mimicked Pound’s language, fractured syntax and spelling. In writing, J had perfect pitch.

Oblivious to future disaster and as excited as Huck Finn setting off down the Mississippi on a raft, Tom suffered impatiently through countless preparatory details that included many painful inoculations, and posted the draft typescript of his final volume of poetry, *The Geography of Lograire*, to Laughlin. Merton had told Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr that he had “created” the land of Lograire, deriving the name from Des Loges, the real name of the poet François Villon.⁹ Having entrusted the “geography” of his fictional country to J, Tom set off for real Asia.

Some weeks after Merton’s death, J pulled himself together and set out to complete the notes for *The Geography of Lograire*. This did not prove to be too difficult, since J had Merton’s introduction to guide him. “The ‘geography’ of the poem,” Laughlin would write much later, “simply is that of Merton’s mind,” and this opening fragment, J thought, was his poetry “most liberated from convention.” “The originality of *Lograire*,” J continued, “lies in Merton’s use of parody and reconstructed myth.”¹⁰ Tracing Tom’s many references, J was soon deep in early Mesoamerican

9. See Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969) 140-41.

10. James Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” draft essay (Carol Jane Bangs private collection; subsequent references will be cited as “Laughlin, ‘Thomas Merton’” parenthetically in the text).

history and cultural anthropology, reading *The Book of Chilam Balam*, Bernardino de Sahagún, Bishop Diego de Landa and Miguel Covarrubias on the Maya and Aztecs; Ibn Battuta's *Travels in Asia and Africa*; studying the Ranters of seventeenth-century England and the Ghost Dances of the Dakota Indians. J thought that some cuts were advisable, "But I didn't feel I had the right to do it after he was gone."¹¹ In J's opinion, *Lograire* was "far and away the best thing he ever did in poetry."¹²

Now to look at *The Asian Journal*, by Thomas Merton but as constructed by James Laughlin—no longer a mere editor, but a literary archeologist, recreating as faithfully as he knew how the author's intention, guided by the armature, the central narrative, the skeleton of nouns and verbs left behind by Merton.

Laughlin's varied experiences had in fact suited him to edit Merton's writings, both about what went on in his mind and about his experience of vast Asia. Laughlin had corresponded with Merton since 1944, and visited him with some regularity beginning in 1947. From 1952 through 1957 J had worked for the Ford Foundation, and during this period had made four extended trips to Asia. He possessed first-hand knowledge of Calcutta, New Delhi, Madras, Mahabalipuram, Ceylon and Thailand. (By sheer coincidence, I too have visited many of the places Merton saw, including the mountain areas that Laughlin missed: Merton's descriptions of Pathankot, Dalhousie, Kurseong, Ghoom and Darjeeling are to the life, even to the street sounds, which J chose to render exactly as Tom had written them: "Taxi call kids. Sharp cries spread rev motor whisper pony feet Hoo! Hoo!" [*AJ* 158].) J had helped edit and had published a number of books by Indian authors, and was widely if rather haphazardly familiar with the religions of the Orient. Moreover, he had come away with a great love for the Far East and the sub-continent. When Merton had been planning his trip, J had provided him with advice on everything from obtaining a credit card to what enterovioform tablets to take against intestinal bacteria.

Laughlin's task was indeed formidable. For one thing, Tom Merton had not, as he traveled, attempted to create a coherent manuscript for his *Asian Journal*, but had left three notebooks and a couple of address books, along with postcards and notes on loose scraps of paper. The spiral bound "Notebook A"—the notebook designations were added by the Bellarmine University Thomas Merton Center—has a fairly coherent

11. James Laughlin to Kay Boyle, December 30, 1969 (Houghton Library archives, Harvard University).

12. James Laughlin to Kay Boyle, November 10, 1969 (Houghton Library archives, Harvard University).

structure indicating that Merton probably intended it eventually to evolve into a publishable text. “Notebook B,” a bound ledger with a page number printed on the top outside corner of each page, turned out to be a “private” journal, partly duplicated in “Notebook A.” “I have no special plans for immediate new writing,” Merton had written in his “September 1968 Circular Letter to Friends” (*AJ* 296) before his departure for Asia, but he seems to have changed his mind as the significance of his experiences became evident to him. The third notebook, “C,” a small pocket one, was filled with hastily scrawled words: travel schedules and trip details; Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan words spelled phonetically; phrases and short passages. J’s edited text is primarily a collation of notebooks A and B, with Notebook C providing occasional hints.

J created a main editorial troika: himself, Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart, with Amiya Chakravarty as Consulting Editor. Stone had been Merton’s literary agent from 1940 through 1959, and continued to advise him on publishing matters subsequently. Brother Patrick had been Dom James Fox’s secretary for ten years, and on the abbot’s retirement his successor, Dom Flavian, had asked Brother Patrick to serve as Merton’s secretary. Laughlin had known Amiya Chakravarty as far back as 1953, when the Bengali poet and professor of philosophy and religion had been on the faculty of Boston University; and in 1966 Chakravarty had visited Merton at Gethsemani. These, then, were the four people most responsible for forming Merton’s drafts and notes into a coherent text, each of them with strong though differing personal ties to Merton.

The basic text would involve the editors in delicate, nuanced decisions—for instance, the Dalai Lama had spoken to Father Louis off the record about the Tantra, and Merton’s notes on these talks, if not sensitively edited, could be taken for Buddhist dogma, to the embarrassment of the Tibetan Buddhist leader. Complicating everything was Tom’s rapid handwriting, legible on the whole but rendered every problematic at times by the jerks and jolts of Indian trains and taxis. Brother Patrick now set about typing a fair copy of every scrap of manuscript in the brown case, employing his skill as a typist and his familiarity with Merton’s “rather difficult handwriting.”¹³ Having an unblemished typescript to work from greatly simplified the editors’ task.

Soon Laughlin was in correspondence with many of the Buddhists Merton had met in his travels. The “English Buddhist monk,” Bhikku Khantipalo, “was especially helpful,” even writing an essay on “mindfulness” (*AJ* 297-304) to complement the brief notes Merton had scribbled

13. Brother Patrick Hart to Ian S. MacNiven, October 29, 2011.

after their meeting.¹⁴ Despite the hard work, J Laughlin said, “It was a happy time because I felt that Tom was at my side urging me on and lending a helping hand” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 49). Toward the end of 1969 J estimated that completing the editing of *The Asian Journal* “looks like a three or four months’ job.”¹⁵ He was off by almost three years. “My work on the editing of the Merton ‘Asian Journal’ goes much more slowly than I would wish,” he said later; “I have to sandwich it in with my own regular work, but I get through a few pages every day.”¹⁶

A special problem was presented to the editors in the matter of Merton’s many quotations, passages that he tended to write on the left-hand pages of his notebooks. Often incomplete or written in fragments clearly intended to jog his memory later, these had to be tracked down and checked for accuracy. His reading on his journey had been extensive—he said that he was chagrined and humiliated at being forced to pay overweight on his flights, so that he kept discarding books, giving them away or mailing them to Gethsemani. Laughlin drew upon Purusottama Lal in Calcutta, whose translations of Sanskrit plays New Directions had published; he corresponded with Gary Snyder, a New Directions poet, who had studied for ten years at a Zen center in Japan; he consulted Lobsang Lhalungpa of Tibet and scores of others. Drawing upon their knowledge and his own now-considerable focused reading, J compiled the fifty-five page glossary, mainly of terms pertaining to Eastern religion, that concludes *The Asian Journal* volume as New Directions would publish it (*AJ* 363-418).

Laughlin’s editorial decisions were guided by two principles: he wanted to maintain the appearance of a trip diary—this was, after all, the story of a journey of personal discovery. But Laughlin was a seasoned publisher who knew that the readers of *The Asian Journal* would expect a coherent narrative and standard punctuation. Merton had in the main followed the *chronology* of his travels, but he had not necessarily recorded his impressions at the time he experienced them, nor had he always written out all that he had to say about a subject at one time, but might return to it in another notebook and at a later date. The manuscript journal page headed “Dec 5—Singapore,” begins with notes on Merton’s avid newspaper reading. Merton’s words in the “Dec 5” entry were transcribed almost verbatim for the *Asian Journal* text, except for changing ampersands to the written *and*, adding a few marks of punctuation, and

14. James Laughlin to Gary Snyder, May 12, 1971 (Houghton Library archives, Harvard University).

15. James Laughlin to Kay Boyle, November 10, 1969 (Houghton Library archives, Harvard University).

16. James Laughlin to Laurence Pollinger, April 7, 1970 (ND correspondence files).

changing “at full moon the ovaries of sea urchins *reached an unusually large size*” to “are unusually large in size” (*AJ* 230; italics added) (this change is hardly an improvement). Not knowing how or whether Merton would have incorporated such randomly encountered news items into his final text, J elected to include them, as he had when he was editing *The Geography of Lograire*. Merton was grimly amused that a soldier on a “crow eradication team” had been reprimanded by a magistrate for “rashly discharging his shotgun” in the streets, injuring ten children. Merton does not comment further on the incident, and while realizing that he might well have cut it in a future editing of the text, J simply left it in as written.

The editors got into trouble, however, when they placed the “Dec 5” section under December 4 in the published book without changing the single word needed to prevent an apparent error. Merton had written in Notebook A, “Polonnaruwa was such an experience that I could not write hastily of it & cannot write now, or not adequately.” Nonetheless, Merton returned to the drive across Ceylon in the next paragraph: “Polonnaruwa—that was Monday. Today is Thursday. Heavy rain in Kandy.” This presented J with a problem: Merton was in Singapore when he wrote this entry, but for good thematic coherence it seemed preferable to round out his visit to Ceylon with his climactic contemplation of the Buddha statues of Polonnaruwa. Also, while there is no entry in Merton’s private journal, the black bound Notebook B, for the *day* of his trip to Polonnaruwa, he wrote in it at some length about the trip in an entry headed “Dec 3 Colombo.” What to do? Laughlin fused together the two main texts dealing with Polonnaruwa, editing them for coherence, and inserted them into the entry for December 4. He changed the sentence, “Polonnaruwa—that was Monday,” to read, “I visited Polonnaruwa on Monday” (which would have been December 2) and retained the next sentence unchanged, “Today is Thursday” (*AJ* 231). The insertion of the first person “I” was completely in keeping with Merton’s practice throughout; however, J created an error by allowing Thursday to remain as the day of the journal entry, since the fourth was a *Wednesday*. Perhaps J never checked a calendar for 1968.

The Gal Vihara, or rock temple, at Polonnaruwa consists of four statues of the Buddha, standing, seated and reclining—at the time of Merton’s visit the standing Buddha was thought to be of the monk Ananda, the Buddha’s disciple—carved from a single immense rock of grey granite. The largest of these is forty-six feet in length, and most powerfully depicts the Buddha prone, either in sleep or death. Laughlin reproduced Merton’s Notebook A text on Polonnaruwa for the length of about two manuscript pages with almost no changes beyond regularizing punctuation. Then,

just before the paragraph in Notebook A describing the departure from Polonnaruwa, J abruptly shifted to Notebook B, the “private notebook,” in which Merton explains what had so struck him about the site.

I consider this Merton’s epiphany, perhaps the most important single *revelatory* moment of his life. I am not arguing that this was more important than the attaining of faith that led to his conversion to Catholicism, a long build-up in time, the time described in the many pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.¹⁷ Polonnaruwa was, in contrast, a *moment of revelation*, and Merton describes it as such, writing in Notebook B: “When looking at this I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, & an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident, obvious.” J rendered this as follows, dropping the *When* and supplying the bridging phrase *at these figures*, so that the published text reads, “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” (*AJ* 233, 235). J followed the text as Merton wrote it, except for adding “and” between “evident, obvious.” In any case, Merton wrote here with the consciousness of having achieved the mystical experience that he long felt had eluded him: “I don’t know when in my life I ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination,” he continued. “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” (*AJ* 235-36). Then J turned back to Notebook A, to get Merton away from Polonnaruwa, back to Kandy, and on the road to Bangkok: “The whole thing is very much a Zen garden We . . . started on the long drive home to Kandy” (*AJ* 236).

And so J continued, adding, deleting, changing: smoothing the text as he thought his friend Tom would have done had he lived. Even more than rebuilding Merton’s style and fleshing out the “nouns and verbs,” J’s inspired juxtapositions of the various texts become a creative act of great significance.

Merton accomplished his revelation, wrote about it, and within a week he would have departed from the world of the living. His words to the audience at nearly the end of his December 10 talk in Bangkok on “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives,” are chillingly appropriate, as a premonition: “So I will disappear” (*AJ* 343).¹⁸

17. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 169-225.

18. This dramatic conclusion was apparently not given this focus by Laughlin’s

Two years later J threatened to disappear himself, into mental illness. In the summer of 1970, his work on the *Asian Journal* nearing completion, Laughlin began to feel out of sorts, an ill-defined malaise characterized by periods of lethargy, aboulia, loss of will. Convinced that it was more than mere imagining, J's wife, Ann Resor Laughlin, bullied him into seeing Dr. Benjamin Wiesel, the head of psychiatric medicine at the Hartford General Hospital. Rather like a woman who has endured a long and difficult childbirth, J seemed near total collapse. As if to suggest parturition, J described himself as "laboring" on the editing of *The Asian Journal*. Dr. Wiesel diagnosed the onset of bipolar mania, a mental affliction influenced in Laughlin's case by genetics—it had attacked his grandfather, father and two uncles—and stress. It was perhaps no mere coincidence that the onset of bipolar illness followed not so very long after the sudden death of J's religio-psychic double. Fortunately for J and for the *Asian Journal* editing, Wiesel was a pioneer in using lithium to treat bipolar disease. He put J on the drug, his condition was stabilized, and he was able to resume intensive work on the book.

J worked most of the time in his home at Norfolk, Connecticut, in those days. In January 1971 Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick came for four days of intensive effort, with Brother Patrick playing tunes from *Fiddler on the Roof* on the piano when they needed a break. They went over the text line by line, sometimes arguing. Merton had described the sky above Kanchenjunga peak, seen from Darjeeling, as having "a few discreet showings of whorehouse pink" (*AJ* 156); Naomi wanted to change this, but was over-ruled. "We were having a devil of a time," Brother Patrick told me, deciphering one particular entry that Tom had written on a bus trip. "Any brandy in the house?" Naomi asked J. He found a dusty bottle in the kitchen and poured her a glass. She took a great swallow, returned to the notebook, turned it upside-down, and immediately read out the passage that had stumped them all.¹⁹

Realizing that Tom might well have edited out many of the impres-

editing, but was rendered thus in the transcript of the talk as he received it. The transcript at the Bellarmine Merton Center, which is probably identical to the one that Laughlin worked from, ends with an ellipsis: "So I will disappear . . ." In a recording of the conclusion to the actual address, as presented in Paul Wilkes' and Audrey Glynn's *Merton: A Film Biography* (1984), Merton's voice is heard ending with the words, "So I will disappear from view and we can all have a Coke or something. Thank you very much." At some point, the final fifteen words were cut from the transcript to make the ending startlingly more telling in prophetic retrospect. It is my belief that Laughlin, having the transcript to work from, would not have gone through the bother of obtaining the recording and listening to it.

19. Brother Patrick Hart, interview by Ian S. MacNiven (September 25, 2007).

sions and observations that he jotted down, J still felt that he and his co-editors should not presume to make excisions except where absolutely required for clarity. The result was what may be the most *all-inclusive* of Merton's major books: metaphysics and esoteric philosophy jostle against phrases from comic strips and newspaper stories. Everything is there in *The Asian Journal* for all to read.

In his *Man in the Sycamore Tree*, Edward Rice, Merton's friend since his young manhood at Columbia, maintained that Merton had died a Buddhist.²⁰ J would have none of this. He responded angrily that it was a "complete fabrication" and that *The Asian Journal* made it clear that Tom was merely interested *as a Christian* in learning from the Tibetan *rimpoches*.²¹ J yearned toward generalized *faith*, yet he could not countenance a defection from Christianity by his spiritual double. Laughlin needed the reassurance of a *Christian* agency. Merton, secure in his faith, was not threatened by the great unbounded expanse of religious thought.

J might have missed publishing *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but in editing and publishing *The Asian Journal* he achieved the other bookend to Merton's writing career, a book that is *extrospective*, a looking outward, as well as introspective, his account of the revelation that capped the *seeking* begun in his first great book of introspection. Of course, we can only speculate what Merton would have thought of his *Asian Journal*, where he might have placed it in comparison with his first major prose work. The edited text of *The Asian Journal* is open-ended in the sense that in it Merton exposed himself to the entire universe of religious belief. As such, it should provoke inquiry, and, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, the unedited notebooks deserve to be and indeed have been puzzled over and interpreted into a canonical text by devoted and inspired collaborators, not least among them James Laughlin.

20. Edward Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) 139; but see 13 for Rice's more qualified evaluation of Merton's relationship with Buddhism.

21. James Laughlin to N. Smallwood, July 13, 1971 (ND correspondence files).