The Conflict Not Yet Fully Faced: Thomas Merton as Reader in His Journals

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In 1959, Thomas Merton expresses his feelings on the role of reading in the monastic life:

> Does it matter how much you read? What matters is the quality and variety of one's reading. Most monks are enclosed within too narrow limits and read too much of the same things and by losing their perspective lose their capacity to learn from what they read. I am perhaps at the other extreme now, but I really think that in almost everything I read I find new food for spiritual life, new thoughts, new *discoveries* ....
>
> There are a hundred things I want to get to.[1]

However, while cleaning out his office in August 1965, nearer the end of his life, he writes:

> The insane accumulation of books, notes, manuscripts, letters, papers in the novice master's room simply appalls me ... [Not reading books requested from publishers] and the anxiety which tears my gut, and the writing of letters, etc., etc. is certainly a type of a real deep conflict, one I have not yet fully faced ...
>
> But I know more and more, "in silence and hope shall my strength be" if I can only develop a silence of printed words, or words possessed and accumulated (mere shit). But the first step in this is to *read seriously* the good things that are there and when I do this there is an immediate change for the better ...[2]

In perhaps the most concise form possible, these quotations present two extremes of Merton's feelings about the role of reading in his life. Of course, any full analysis of Merton's reading would have to include complete study of his "reading notebooks," his novitiate conferences and all his literary writings. Therefore, this study of the journals must be seen as an initial step only. In the first quotation, Merton extols the value of a broad and varied experience

in reading, often beyond the traditional boundaries of monastic literature, as rich spiritual food and a fertile ground for intellectual growth. He pleads for a more varied diet in monastic reading in order to sharpen the monk's ability to learn from his reading. However, in the latter, the "hundred things [he wanted] to get to" become overwhelming, an obstacle and detriment to contemplative life.[3] Inundated by the variety of reading he previously lauded, he longs for a "a silence of printed words," a deep interior silence, and a rededication to reading seriously the "good things" that immediately restore his spiritual balance.[4] The conflict between reading as a critical component of spiritual life and as a hindrance to the contemplative vocation, made explicit by these quotations, is truly one that he has "not yet fully faced" by 1965.[5] Moreover, this conflict is never completely resolved by Merton, as the life-long nature of these reading habits testify to this unresolved tension within him.

In academic circles, the journals are often used as evidence for other arguments being made about Merton, as in Mary Jo Weaver's "Conjectures of a Disenchanted Reader," which uses the journals to critique his handling of his relationship with his lover, 'M.' It appears that no sustained academic exploration of the journals for their own sake has been undertaken, except through the arrangement of texts as a quasi-auto-biography, *The Intimate Merton*. The present study of the modalities in which Merton engaged his reading reveals a reader who frequently shifts between a narrow focus on a passage or a broad summary of a whole text, and between an intellectual response and an emotional response. His focus could be centered on a close reading of a short text, a habit which was influenced by his monastic training with *lectio divina*, or could be involved in a broad summary reading which subsumed an entire book or many books into more general or universal applications. His response to his reading falls, typically, into either what I will call an academic/intellectual mode or a personal/emotional mode. Merton constantly oscillates between these four modes of reading throughout his lifetime, and the life-long nature of these tendencies reveals how entrenched such "conflict" was within him, one that he has "not yet fully faced," the tension between the monastic call for interior silence and his personal quest for intellectual satiation.

Lectio divina, the ancient monastic practice of reading, was a primary influence on the Merton of the monastic years, and pro-

vides a point of departure for a broader discussion on his reading in general. *Lectio divina*, as a form of reading, somehow slips out of the definitional hold of that category, and is something much more. Simply, *lectio divina*, meaning "sacred reading," is the prayerful reading of Scripture. Beyond a casual reading of Scripture, *lectio divina* gently opens up the flower of contemplation, revealing the heart of mystical life and the goal of the monastic life of prayer. Traditionally, a very short passage of Scripture (often a single verse, or even less, just a phrase) is read over and over for plain understanding. Having memorized the text, the monk explores its allegorical meaning by perhaps delving into secondary-source commentary on it, usually the Church Fathers or other saints or mystics. Absorbed in both the repetition of the phrase and its meaning to the monk allegorically, he would express his emotions in a heartfelt prayer, based on the words of the text. The final stage of *lectio divina* is the culmination of the entire practice and its full revelation: the state of contemplation, where words as vehicles for meaning break down, and one is born up to a loving, sometimes ecstatic, experience of the divine. As Jean Leclercq duly notes in a text read and respected by Merton, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, learning is "necessary" in the religious quest, yet at some point the text must be "transcended and elevated" in the religious experience.[6] For the purposes here, what will be described as a mode of reading based on *lectio divina* will be characterized primarily by one or several of the following qualities: a narrow focus on a phrase or short quotation, the repetition of the phrase, prayerful rumination on it and its multivalent meanings, and finally its use as a "spring board for contemplation."[7]

Lectio Divina with Sacred Texts

Merton, a product of Trappist life, drew on a long Cistercian tradition of meditative reading, and his journals indicate he was engaged in this sort of reading with very traditional texts. Even before entering Gethsemani as a postulant, Merton was engaged in a style of reading influenced by a narrow rumination on a sacred text, in a method similar to *lectio divina*. While on retreat at Gethsemani during Holy Week in 1941, he writes in the first volume of his journal a very short verse, John 14:29 ("And now *I have told you before it comes to pass: that when it shall come to pass, you may believe*").[8] He then asks himself, "What does this sentence mean"? He ruminates on the passage, and says that it "does not have much

sense if we only take it to mean that it is a sort of prophecy of the crucifixion," because then it would be "unnecessary." Chewing on the meaning of the short verse, he says "what He means is more [than] that," and goes on to explain that the disciples, in possessing Christ's parables and teaching, "possess the truth, but they do not rightly know what it is." He concludes that, allegorically, "So it is with every one of us"; even though we are told Christ's truth in words, it must "become alive in us" by "working itself out within each one of us in our crucifixion and resurrection." In this short selection, he focuses on a narrow passage from Scripture and ruminates on it, meditating on it discursively, in a state of *meditatio.* In this case, he uses an orthodox, accepted text for meditation, and tries through mental athletics to unpack the short verse's multiple meanings.

In August 1949, some eight years later, Merton still exhibits a tendency to observe closely sacred texts, but this time he focuses on whatever "happened to ... [turn] up" in his reading of Ecclesiasticus. He "simply took up Ecclesiasticus where [he] left off" and kept reading. He records that he spent "an hour or so on the 32nd chapter," which, "[o]n the surface," appears as a "prosaic little chapter about table manners." But there is always deeper meaning in scripture, if one "know[s] how to read it," and he finds in this brief selection from scripture for the "first time that Ecclesiasticus is not dull." Believing in the value of *lectio divina,* he decides to push through the apparently dull text: "The fact that God is speaking ought to be enough to invest everything with an inestimable value. There are meanings within meanings and depths within depths, and I hasten to say that mere irresponsible allegory does not reveal the real meaning and the real depths."[9]

Thus Merton acknowledges the hidden richness of even the most obscure text. Deep within the passage is the Word speaking to him, and his job is to unearth that meaning. After outlining in a bullet-format a number of revelations he gleaned from this text, including new understandings about monastic life, the role of the Holy Spirit and the place of pleasure in life, Merton reflects more generally on the importance of holy scripture in his life. He writes,

> Merely to set down some of the communicable meanings that can be found in a passage of Scripture is not to exhaust the true meaning or value of that passage. Every world [*sic*] that comes from the mouth of God is nourishment that feeds the soul [...] Whether Scripture tells of David hiding from Saul in

> the mountains, [...] or whether it tells about Jesus raising up the son of the widow of Nain [...] – everywhere there are doors and windows opened into the same eternity – and the most powerful communication of Scripture is the *insitum verbum* [the engrafted word], the secret and inexpressible seed of contemplation planted in the depths of our soul and awakening it with an immediate and inexpressible contact with the Living Word, that we may adore Him in Spirit and in Truth.[10]

This description of sacred reading is steeped in influence from *lectio divina*, and Merton's emphasis on the contact with Christ, the Living Word, through the text, aligns nicely with Leclercq's recognition that the "encounter [...] between God's saving word and the innermost human spirit" is an immediate "experience of Christ" through the scriptures.[11]

In Merton's journals we find that he frequently used one of the most standard texts for monastic contemplation, the Book of Psalms, and, in 1958, he directly addresses how he uses the Psalms in his daily practice. He records that on Good Friday (April 4) 1958, the psalter was "something tremendous," because the monks were allowed to meditate on the psalms by themselves for an hour.[12] He had been reading Dom Leclercq's *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, and uses the language of *lectio divina* to describe his experience. Repeating the psalms "over and over by heart in the depths of [his] being," he describes his experience as *meditatio*, a term in Leclercq's book. Merton admits that he had recited these psalms "scores of times before without ever seeing them," but now, through this "absolutely essential" practice of *meditatio*, he has discovered new, rich meaning deep in the scriptures. He focuses on two verses in Psalm 85, verses 12 and 13, and copies them in his journal because they were ones "[i]n particular" that he had rediscovered. Realizing the importance of this practice of *lectio divina*, he vows that he will "return more often to this kind of *meditatio*," indicating that he had neglected the practice previously and only now discovered or remembered its true value. His thoughts move to the problems of the monastery, which he claims has not only neglected the practice "totally" but also has been misinterpreting *lectio divina* as "thinking about" certain lines, instead of dwelling in the presence of God through the text. Merton's contrast of "saying them over [...] in the depths of [his] being" and the institutional misrepresentation of *lectio divina* as "thinking about" the lines show his preference for the experience

of God's presence over a mere scholarly or intellectual grasp of the psalms' meanings.

Even though he focused more on the general feel of Psalms 85 and 86 and the value of deeply internalized repetition of them, he also would show a proclivity to concentrate on specific lines as loci of spiritual value. In Volume 6, he records specific lines from the Psalms that have been "driving themselves home" recently to him.[13] Thus there appears a tension in his experience with the Psalms and his *lectio* in general. In 1958 he learned or remembered the value of repetition and internalization of an entire psalm (or two!), and in this passage of 1966 he was struck by specific lines from them. In this way he was able to experience *lectio divina* both as an opportunity to reflect more generally on a longer passage, incorporating the flow of its imagery and emotions, and as an opportunity to lift specific lines or isolated phrases which could be used as sources of meditation.[14]

Lectio Divina with Non-Biblical Texts

In contrast to his ruminations on these traditional texts, Merton reveals in a number of important journal entries that his experience with *lectio divina* in its traditional context as a meditation on a passage of Scripture influenced how he read non-sacred texts. In his pre-monastic journal, he realizes "in a flash" that he may be "capable of understanding Racine," whom he had "never really seen anything in," but was willing to admit there was "something there."[15] Like his Ecclesiasticus reading, where he opens the book rather randomly to see what it will reveal, so does he happen upon the fourth act of *Berenice*, "where Titus is speaking to himself."[16] He transcribes six lines in French and proclaims them "tremendously moving in a very pure way."[17] Temporarily thinking about the play as a whole, his thinking returns to the act of transcribing brief passages:

> I wonder how much sense there is in quoting a single line of Racine: every single line, word, comma has an exact place in the whole structure, this symphonic structure. If a line of Racine is to be quoted at all, the only way is to make it fit into another structure, take it and fit it neatly into a paragraph of critical prose, giving it a setting with all kinds of syntactical properties able to support it and show it off to advantage.[18]

Even though it appears he is critiquing this selectively narrow reading of a non-sacred text, he is also demonstrating how such a passage must be fully, deeply explored by a scholarly interpretation to plumb the entirety of its depths. Moreover, he testifies to the "moving" nature of such an exploration of a short, non-sacred text.[19]

Enriching his monastic diet of reading with other foods, in 1959, having spent some eighteen years in the cloister, Merton delves into the use of words in the poetry of Pablo Neruda and Giuseppe Ungaretti. Analyzing each author's use of words, he dismisses the lines of Neruda, saying "each line is a word, but the whole poem is only a line of uninteresting prose with the words strung down the page, one on top of the other."[20] In Ungaretti, on the other hand, "each word is a line or even a poem in itself."[21] Here Merton is expressing how a single word or a well-crafted phrase can open up worlds of interpretation. Just as Merton loved to dig into the depths of the language of the Psalms, he also adored writers who could write with sufficient power to require meditative dissection word by word. His *lectio divina* on the Psalms and other sacred texts was clearly influencing how he read things in general, and shows a preference for texts which allowed him to plunge into their meditative depth.[22]

Merton had a habit of lifting an exciting sentence from a poorly written article and copying it in his journal, a practice, like *lectio divina*, which highlights a short phrase for edification. In the fourth volume of the journals, he notes on April 29, 1961 that he locates a "fine sentence in a mediocre article (part of that on the Church in *DS* [*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*])" which concerns the edification of others.[23] He reflects on this passage and says that it addresses "the worst temptation and the most difficult," which "comes from the fact that we seem to be leading one another into a trap."[24] Superlatives like "the worst" and "the most difficult" emphasize the importance of the temptation addressed by the quotation. While ruminating on this passage, he expands its context, asking himself if God can truly "be ... behind all our official nonsense [at Gethsemani]" including all of their "laws and decrees and statutes and rites and observances."[25] This short sentence on edification propels him into a rumination on monastic life in general, despite the questionable quality of the article from which the quotation was lifted. Even though this verse is not meditated on in the traditional *lectio divina* sense, with silent appreciation of the

presence of God in it, it is still informed by a reading style which characterized Merton's experience with that technique.[26]

Throughout his life, Merton struggled with contemporary texts which forced him to slow down and move line-by-line because of their density, and even though these texts were not sacred, his training in *lectio divina* narrowed his focus to short passages in order to muse on their meditative depth. As early as August 1949, eight years after entering Gethsemani as a postulant, Merton's exposure to *lectio divina* was showing signs of influencing his reading habits, as he was forced to slow his reading and focus on individual phrases. He writes that Fr. Paul Phillipe's book, *La Très Sainte Vierge et le Sacerdoce* is "short," but he has to "read slowly."[27] He "can't read more than three paragraphs of anything without stopping," and if he reads quickly he finds himself "confused," and his mind "simply ceases to grasp anything."[28] He likens a half hour spent reading too quickly to being "roughed up in a dark alley by a gang of robbers."[29] In a similar experience in 1964, he is completely "snowed under by" Rudolf Bultmann.[30] This "revelation" to Merton is "so powerful, so urgent, so important" that "every sentence" stops him and he cannot "seem to get anywhere."[31] The book is so "[f]antastically good" that Merton, in focusing on a text intently in a *lectio divina* fashion, cannot seem to progress.[32] Much like his reading of the Psalms, Job and Ezekiel, he finds in these texts deep meaning that has to be patiently exhumed because of the depth of the texts' richness.

Later in his life, he shows a growing patience in his reading style and greater comfort with the slowness of *lectio divina*. He reads Mai Mai Sze's *Tao of Painting*, a "deep and contemplative book," much more "slowly," to his "great profit."[33] This entry, on June 11, 1965, is almost exactly one year after the previous citation of Bultmann, and in this time Merton has learned, to a certain extent, to calm his mind for reading and open himself up to the richness of the text, patiently gleaning the truths it offers up. During his years in the hermitage, he spends a "whole morning" in 1966 on a "slow reading of *The Myth of Sisyphus* (Camus)."[34] He remarks that before he "shied away" from the book, but "[n]ow it is just right, just what [he needs]."[35] This slow reading may account for his greater appreciation of the book at this later date. In the same journal, about two months later that summer, he again notes that René Char's writing, which is "compact, rich, intense, full," must be read with "time and attention to absorb all that is there."[36]

Merton suggests a "long course of reading, in the full afternoons out under the trees" to digest fully Char's meaning.[37] Even though the works of Phillipe, Bultmann, Camus, Sze and Char are not traditionally accepted texts for *lectio divina*, Merton's exposure to *lectio divina* at Gethsemani and the inculcation of its premises allow him to expand the borders of acceptable texts for *lectio divina* into contemporary and even not specifically religious writers.

A Summary Reader

Even though *lectio divina* would leave a strong impression on Merton, he also utilized a very different method of reading which was exceptionally quick and cursory, and would often reduce an entire book or author's canon into a single phrase or idea. If *lectio divina* can be seen as a process of taking a short phrase and expanding it to uncover all of its meaning and richness, then this summary style reading is the same process, but in the opposite direction. Instead of writing a book on a phrase (*lectio divina*), he often writes a single phrase about an entire book (summary reading). This is not to be unexpected, especially with the volume of material Merton was covering, and his limited time for writing in his journal. In this manner of reading, he operates in three primary modes: a terse criticism of a book, the location of the central concept of a book or the reduction of an author's entire canon to a short phrase. In this way, he reduces a vast amount of material into a condensed form for easier reference in his notes.

In the first mode characteristic of this kind summary reading, he often offers a short criticism of a book, whether positive or negative, and these quick thumbnail sketches of Merton's responses are found throughout the journals. For example, in 1947 he writes that Paul Claudel's verse "bores" him, but Claudel's "poetic prose about the Orient" is "wonderful." Immediately afterwards he writes that Patrice de la Tour du Pin "writes too much"; he calls it "too glib" and "too silly." He sums up that he "[doesn't] like it" or the author's understanding of Christ. In this example he is condensing much of Claudel's verse to the word "boring" and his prose to the word "wonderful."[38] For Patrice de la Tour du Pin, Merton simply doesn't like it, saying he is "too silly" and "too glib."[39] On the other hand, he also writes short phrases about a book he may like as well, as when he calls *The Hidden Face* "remarkably revealing and intelligent," but does not offer any further explanation or rumination.[40] A single page later, he tersely

calls Bruno Snell's *Discovery of the Mind* "enthralling but yet unsatisfactory."[41] Snell's treatment is "[t]oo simplified," and Merton does not comment any further.[42] The entire book, unmentioned in the journals to this point, is reduced to a single phrase and is quickly passed over.

In his comments on Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, Merton characterizes large passages of the book with single words: Arnold's portrait is "disappointing," Manning's is a "masterpiece," while Gordon's is "perplexing and disturbing."[43] This interesting example is typical of a pattern evident in Merton's reading, the tendency to isolate texts as independent, even in a larger work. Again, in Volume 4, Merton comments quickly on Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, saying it is "finely constructed" but "suddenly disintegrates." He calls it "humorous and moving," but also "dignified and sane."[44] Readers of the journals will sometimes be caught off guard with Merton's conciseness, as in his critique of *The Last of the Just*, which he praises as "tremendously moving thing" that "says a great deal," yet he does not elaborate further, except by pointing to pity as "the center" of the book's argument.[45] His high praise in a summary format occurs at other junctures, including his discussion of the *Prison Meditations of Father Delp* ("perhaps the most clear-sighted book of Christian meditations of our time"[46]) and his examination of Zaehner's *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*, a "remarkable book."[47] In all of these examples, Merton does a kind of reverse *lectio divina*, using a phrase to capture an entire book.

If terse criticism marked this first mode of summary reading, then Merton's second tendency to summarize is distinguished by extracting the central kernel of a book and using it as a lodestone to guide him through the rest of the book. He says that "the heart of [Olivier] Clément's book [*Transfigurer les Temps*]" is that "'fallen Time'... *has no present*."[48] Merton goes on to unpack what this means, and quotes from the text to do so (at the end he transcribes one "superbly wise sentence" in a *lectio divina* style).[49] Likewise, in the same volume, Merton finds the "heart of Heschel's splendid book—*God in Search of Man*" to be the "consistent emphasis on the importance of time, the *event* in revealed religion."[50] This emphasis on 'event' guides Merton's reflection on the entire book in a summary style; however, he does not offer a thumbnail sketch but goes into some detail in a several paragraph response to this theme of the book. While reading Han Urs von Balthasar's

Herrlichkeit, Merton says the book boils down to "this one central thing: all theology is a scientific doctrine and originates at the point where the act of faith ... becomes understanding."[51] Merton calls this "extremely important," even though it "sounds trivial."[52] Thus within his counter-*lectio divina* trend of summarizing, he also, beyond offering quick criticism of a text, finds an overriding thesis or idea which drives an entire book.

In a third modality of summary reading, Merton takes the previous tendency to the next level and condenses all of the works by a particular author or the author's thesis on life itself to a single phrase or word or idea. After eight years struggling with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Merton discovers that the "foundation of [the] whole doctrine" of St. Bernard is that "God is Truth and Christ is Truth Incarnate," and humankind's responsibility is thus to be "true to ourselves and true to Christ and true to God." It is "only when this emphasis on truth is forgotten" that Saint Bernard becomes "sentimental."[53] Thus Bernard and all his writings can be reduced to a central core, the understanding of which unlocks Bernard's truth. Similarly, when reading Sergei Bulgakov, Merton claims the Bulgakov's Sophianism is "built on" the idea that Creation was made for the sake of the Incarnation.[54] Merton is again ignoring specific texts of Bulgakov and instead surveys the entirety of his work and thought, the keystone of which is this idea.

With another Russian theologian, Nikolai Berdyaev, Merton "sympathize[s] with" or agrees with the "whole of his doctrine" in a "general way," although his agreement does not necessarily extend to "each particular fact."[55] In this case, Merton is skimming over individual details of Berdyaev's arguments and even books themselves, composing a trans-textual summation of Berdyaev's theology and agreeing with it in general (he also does this with Bultmann: see his "idea of God").[56] With the existentialist Albert Camus, Merton boldly states that the "central idea in Camus is that *revolt* is the affirmation of man in his common nature."[57] To Merton, Camus, in all the various novels, stories and essays he published, can be reduced to the idea of *revolt*. Merton correlates authors with key words, which guide all of their thought, regardless of the form it takes; for Saint Bernard it is 'truth,' for Bulgakov it is 'incarnation/creation,' for Camus it is 'revolt.' Merton here may be ignoring the entire developmental arc of these authors, with the complexity and specificity of individual books, but he also is navigating his way through a vast body of material,

and needs to summarize the overriding theological or philosophical agenda of authors so he can triangulate his own position.

The Intellectual Response

Lectio divina and this summary style of reading represent two different movements within the same intellectual funnel. Whether all the ideas, complex arguments, recantations, paradoxes and contradictions are funneling downward and being reduced to a central argument, or whether a single phrase is expanded and unpacked in prayerful rumination to blossom into new revelations, other ideas, complex connections, or personal experience, Merton shows a sort of mental unsettledness in his reading. Sometimes he distills a core truth (whether in a single work or in all works) from an author he enjoys, and other times he finds a phrase which opens up a wide array of new understandings. He even will alternate these styles within a single journal entry, because his reading habits constantly were shifting around. This tension between his narrow and wide focus on his reading is complemented by a tension regarding his response to his reading. His impersonal, intellectual response to his reading, where he breaks down individual arguments, challenges assumptions and answers questions authors left unanswered opposes his more personal, emotional response, wherein his excitement at the works' spiritual resonance with him trumps any sort of intellectual distance.

A: Comparison of Arguments

One modality of his intellectual response to his reading is his tendency to compare the arguments of often very disparate authors, theologians or philosophers. He would sometimes bring relatively similar authors together, such as St. Bernard and St. John of the Cross.[58] He writes that Bernard's tenth chapter in *On the Love of God* and his sermons on the Song of Songs bring the two authors "into line together."[59] "When they reach their goal, they are together in their way of looking at things."[60] So these two Christian authors' ideas on mystical marriage with Christ can be conjoined, if their arguments are broken down and understood intellectually. St. John of the Cross, one of Merton's favorite authors, beyond having more obvious connections with other Christian writers, also surprisingly has connections to Werner Heisenberg.

Merton says the uncertainty principle is "oddly like [the theology of] St. John of the Cross" in that God "eludes the grasp of concepts" and that "in the ultimate constitution of matter there is *nothing really there.*"[61] So Heisenberg and science can elucidate spiritual truths, and Merton cherishes Heisenberg's idea that materialism is "now unmasked *as a faith*" in the light of the deconstructive potency of the uncertainty principle.[62] In even less orthodox marriages, Merton conjoins Anselm of Canterbury and J.P. Sartre. Their understanding of liberty, even though "poles apart," has "a great deal in common."[63] Merton deconstructs their arguments and terminology, concluding that "[t]hus for both Sartre and Anselm, the exercise of true freedom is demanded for a being to become what it *is.*"[64] Merton integrates their vocabulary in his synthesis, comparing the "*salaud* [sloven] of Sartre and the *insipiens* [fool] of Anselm."[65] Again, three months later, in late November of 1963, Merton muses innocently on the possibility that the "*tricherie* [trickery] of Sartre" may align with the "*rectitudo* of St. Anselm," and wonders if there is "any correspondence" between Chapter 11 in *De Casu Diaboli* and Sartre's "*néant* [nothingness]."[66] Merton does not extrapolate the consequence of the possible correspondence, but his imaginative mind certainly enjoys these interesting, syncretic combinations.

This tendency to compare arguments made by different authors occasionally is present when Merton compares his own, unspoken and developing theology with the philosophy of other authors. When struggling with his relationship with the hospital nurse he fell in love with and his own solitude, Merton finds that the "answer is in Camus' principle: that the absurd man is without (human at least) hope," and this hopelessness "isolates him in the pure present" and "makes him 'available' in the present."[67] Comparing Camus and his own ideas on the inability to have full knowledge, Merton writes that he can "accept what [he doesn't] know as unknown (like Camus)."[68] Only a sentence later Merton is demarcating his difference from Camus, writing that he "differ[s] from Camus in the immense, unknown hope that is [his] own aspect of the 'absurd.'"[69] Interestingly, he calls faith here the "fundamental revolt," using the vocabulary he assigned to the central idea of Camus as I have argued earlier (see p. 216). Camus and Merton are compared in this passage along lines of intellectual agreement, and their differences are defined by Merton in his application of Camus's thought to his own position. In commenting

on von Balthasar, Merton vows to "read him more deeply," because he realized "to what extent [his] own theology goes along with that of Balthasar."[70] These entries show a Merton who, while able to break down other authors' ideas, would also compare their insights with his own.

Arguably the most important connections Merton drew intellectually from his reading were the contacts between Eastern and Western authors. As early as 1960, eight years before his death in Asia, Merton was distilling the implications of Kao Tzu's argument and comparing his conclusions with St. Bernard and Mencius. He writes that there could be an "interesting comparison" between these three, in regard to the "four beginnings."[71] Later in this volume, Merton's reading of Jacques Maritain's essay on Descartes "in connection with Fénelon" is "revealing in relation to Zen" and displays a flurry of comparative work.[72] The "inane Cartesian spirit" corrupted the West with a "the reification of concepts, the idolization of reflexive consciousness, the flight from being into verbalism, mathematics and rationalization," and has to be corrected with the shattering of this "fetish" Cartesian mirror by Zen.[73] Again Merton shows his preference for Eastern insights in his reading of Nishida's *The Intelligible World*, which is "like Evagrius, and yet better."[74] Reading T. R. V. Murti's "clear and sensible exposition" of Tantra while in Asia, Merton is "left musing on St. Irenaeus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, the catechesis of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, early Christian liturgy, baptism ..."[75] Only four days before his death, he compares the idea of self-contradiction in Nagarjuna and Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*.[76] Merton's syncretic consciousness was quick to utilize authors, regardless of Eastern or Western labels, in his struggle with universal human problems.

B: Engagement

A second modality characteristic of Merton's intellectual engagement with material was his breaking down of arguments, so in this style he actively dissects parts of arguments in an effort to understand them. In his pre-monastic journal, Merton breaks down Thomistic and Augustinian theology in a style of reading which is a "thinking out" of various implications imbedded in the texts he was reading. This long entry explores the goals of Augustine's and Thomas's writings, their different styles, their similarities, their contrast with previous philosophical movements (Plato, Socrates, etc), and the place of the intellect in their mes-

sages.[77] Merton shows no real excitement or emotional response to this reading; it is evidence of a young convert to Catholicism who is grounded in literary criticism exploring the ideas of his new faith.[78]

An important example of this trend to break down arguments into manageable pieces is found when Merton is called out for his mistakes in an article he wrote. Merton's initially blasé attitude toward the article which went "to the great trouble of refuting something [he] must have said somewhere about contemplation" turns to an intellectual feeding-frenzy.[79] From January 22 to 26, Merton lays out in outline form the points made against him, recognizes the weak points in his article, struggles with his own ideas in light of this criticism, and ultimately returns to the *Summa theologiae* for clarification. This ends up being an "immense help" to him, and Thomas's definition of a 'state,' which Merton uses to see "how [he] had been wrong," helps him "see [his] own way much more clearly."[80] This intellectual clarification requires a systematic and sustained academic investigation to find the key ideas and hidden implications or assumptions in a cited source.[81] Like the young convert who needed to break down the arguments of the church fathers in order to prepare for the monastery, so too does the later Merton need intellectual digestion of the Eastern spiritual masters to prepare for his experiences in Asia. There he would find the physical manifestation of these ideas in living human vessels with whom he would find mutual understanding.

This proclivity to break apart an argument for clearer intellectual insight often involved a second mode of intellectual reading: laying out the text's structural components, presenting an argument in bullet-format or a list. Even though Merton never was one to demand "absolute structural perfection" from a novel or article, he did take these concerns into account.[82] In the pre-monastic journal, he lays out St. Bonaventure's points in an outline format, exploring the three categories of "the beautiful," "the pleasant" and "the wholesome."[83] The "very beautiful paragraph" in the prologue of the Saint Thomas's *Summa theologiae*, which contains "a whole discipline of study," has "three points" about the impediments obstructing the truth, and Merton writes a numbered list of these obstacles.[84] Reading Berdyaev, Merton, in a numbered list, transcribes his two views of the cosmos, an "incomplete [...] cosmos of the Old Testament" and what Berdyaev sees as the "real view" of creation.[85] Again, struggling with Gabriel Marcel, Merton

lists Marcel's points on eschatological consciousness in order to understand his argument adequately.[86] In a criticism of Roger Garaudy's article on Marxist-Catholic dialogue, Merton comments that there are "[c]lear-cut division[s] between us" and lays out the three primary "danger[s]" he sees in Christianity's alignment with a Marxist world view.[87] In response to Rosemary Radford Ruether's *The Church Against Itself*, he feels her analysis is right (he "[trusts] her" because she is "very Barthian") that the "big problem" of the Church, which Catholicism has "refused to face," is the "distortions, the evasions, the perversion of love into power and resentment, and all the virtues of mimicry and practice."[88] Analyzing her argument, he lists her six possible solutions to the modern Church's dilemma, but he finds them somewhat unconvincing, asking her, in his journal, three questions about the implications of her solutions.[89] Monica Furlong, in her biography of Merton, would agree with the intellectual nature of Merton's relationship with Reuther, as it was "a long and very searching intellectual discussion."[90] Regardless, this process of segmenting movements of an author's argument allows for easier mental digestion of a point Merton was trying to assimilate.

C: Response to Question

Yet a another mode of Merton's engagement with intellectual material is his tendency to respond to questions that other authors bring up in the books he is reading. For example, when Berdyaev "overstates the contrast and 'incompatibility'" of sanctity life and genius, he makes an "over-generalized and false" contrast between the two.[91] Yet his "statement of the problem *must* be faced."[92] Merton suggests an option to free Berdyaev and others from this bind. "The solution lies in prayer," Merton writes, and prayer, as a "creative act," reveals "the utmost mystery of our own being to God."[93] In this situation Merton offers an intellectual escape-hatch to the problem of "sanctity and genius" through the act of "[p]rayer as creation."[94] In a slightly less clear example, Merton responds to a "beautiful and deep idea of Abraham Heschel" by asking what determines revelation and its acceptance.[95] Merton, or perhaps Heschel in his book, answers "love"; a "[p]erson makes himself responsible, in terms of love."[96] In these ways, Merton actively engages with the texts he is reading from an intellectual angle, providing answers to the unresolved questions posed (or perceived as unanswered) in the text.

Personal Reflection

These three modalities of a hungry intellectual mind digesting ideas and concepts may suggest a Merton who read in a clinically detached way, with the surgical gloves of literary criticism to protect him from emotional engagement with his reading, but this portrait of him would be severely distorted. Merton did break apart arguments, register points made in his reading in an outline format, challenge biases, unearth hidden assumptions and delve into linguistic analysis, etc. But to contain Merton in this one corner of the spiritual boxing ring for his salvation would be a crippling over-simplification. Years of study at Columbia and teaching at St. Bonaventure's had given a sharp critical edge to his reading, but he also read to work out, in fear and trembling, his own salvation as a cloistered monk. His reading served another purpose beyond intellectual entertainment; it served as the food from heaven, given by God in a special kind of providence, to sustain, direct and inspire him in the quest for his spiritual destiny.

In his journals, perhaps the most ubiquitous examples of Merton responding in an emotional way is when he calls his reading "moving."[97] Even before he entered Gethsemani, Merton, in examining the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius, is "moved in the short meditation on venial sin."[98] His compunction comes "thanks to God" and not of any effort of his own.[99] Having completed this meditation, he feels the "full impact of the greatness and horror of mortal sin."[100] Even though this example could be seen as a state of prayer alone, his reading of the *Spiritual Exercises* certainly provides the groundwork or springboard for a great deal of personal reflection. He would be deeply affected by the journal of Raïssa, which was sent to him by her husband Jacques Maritain, the scholar and philosopher with whom Merton corresponded. He calls it a "most moving and lucid and soul-cleansing book," and enjoys the realization that he and she can "share so perfectly such things."[101] Even more exuberant excitement is found in his reading of William Faulkner's "The Bear." It too, like the *Spiritual Exercises* and the journal of Raïssa, is "[s]hattering, cleansing," but his praise brims over, calling it "a mind-changing and transforming myth that makes you stop to think about re-evaluating everything."[102] The profound revelation from this and "all great writing" for Merton is that it "makes you break through the futility and routine of ordinary life and see the greatness of existence, its seriousness, and the awfulness of wasting it."[103]

Additionally, another clear indicator of Merton responding emotionally to a text would be when he calls it the "answer to everything." His excitement and energy at such reading makes his writing glow with intensity. Finding a "Zen *mondo* in Suzuki," he writes that it is the "answer to everything."[104] In a continuing trend to see in a quotation or book the answer to "everything" he needs, he reads in the "three wonderful chapters in *the Cloud of Unknowing*" a quotation which is "everything" to him at the time.[105] Citing Romans 9-11 as "the key to everything today," he urges that the Church "enter the understanding of Scripture, the wholeness of revelation" during Vatican II, which he sees as "still short of this awareness."[106] Merton was particularly ecstatic in finding in William Faulkner the answer to many of his questions.[107] In all of these cases where Merton sees the key to "all" existence in a work of literature or scripture, he clearly does not respond with an intellectual cognition that all everything is 'contained within,' but with a personal response that the work addresses his primary questions, doubts and fears at that particular juncture of his life.

This capability for books to answer questions in his life and directly clarify his situation as a pragmatic aid is another broad trend that occurs under his experience as a sympathetic reader. He writes that in his observance of the Holy Week liturgy he is "immensely helped and stimulated by the Bouyer book" [*Le Mystère Pascal*].[108] Referring later to St. Augustine in the same volume, Merton says that Augustine's *City of God* "feeds [him], strengthens [him], knits [his] powers together in peace and tranquility."[109] He sings that the "light of God shines to [him] more serenely through the wide open windows of Augustine than through any other theologian."[110] While reading Marcel's *Homo Viator*, Merton feels that it "clarifies much of [his] present struggle and confusion" about his desire to live in further solitude in the hermitage.[111] Over a year later, his needs have changed, and instead, Berdyaev's distinction between the ethics of law and ethics of creativeness is "a very good one for [him] now."[112] In one of his last entries in this volume, he records that Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* "offers a solution to the complex question that has plagued [him]" about the nature of the individual in society, a theme of this period of his reading.[113] Remembering his tumultuous days in the hospital in 1966, he calls Meister Eckhart his "life-raft" during this time.[114] He cites an Eckhart quotation on surrendering selfhood as something Merton has "to get back to," because

its need is "coming to the surface again."[115] In all these cases, Merton's personal life meets his reading in an active and pragmatic dialogue which aids him in his spiritual quest.

Encountering Christ

Merton does not just receive help through other authors and their ideas; at points he hears the voice of Christ speaking to him through the texts, in a providential response to his situation. Before even entering the monastery, he is fascinated by the state Saint Theresa describes, where "one hears God calling in the words of devout people and good books."[116] He exclaims that he feels this very calling of God "in her book so much."[117] He certainly believed that books have a power to speak directly and personally to him, as from the mouth of God. Later, although in a more oblique reference, he refers to the books that "played a part" in his conversion, including books he cites in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, Étienne Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, the poetry of William Blake, and G. F. Lahey's life of G. M. Hopkins.[118] If his conversion can be seen as a moment where he felt God's specific call in his life, then this call was also emanating from the books he was reading. Despite his previous tendency not to like Origen much, in *The Treatise on Prayer* he finds "the first thing of Origen's that [he has] really liked."[119] As he thinks longer on it, his praise builds, calling it "simple and great, ... [o]ne of the best things ever written on prayer," the product of a "tremendous mind."[120] Beyond just calling it "close to the Gospel," he proclaims that "Christ talks and speaks in it."[121] The Christ with whom he had grown close to in prayer was speaking directly to Merton, through the vehicle of Origen's *Treatise on Prayer*. Later he picks up *The Family of Man* and muses on "[h]ow scandalized some men would be if [he] said that the whole book is to [him] a picture of Christ."[122] The "fabulous pictures" are of people throughout the world in various daily activities.[123] In seeing Christ in these pictures, Merton witnesses the incarnation, Christ's entrance into human flesh to become "God-manhood" or our collective human nature "transformed in God!"[124] On another level, however, Merton is also witnessing Christ's incarnation into the book itself. In this way, Christ's incarnation takes place not only in other people, but also in the book which brings these images together. Understanding the voice of God in a sacred text is a rather fundamental idea to Christianity, yet Merton expands the

number of legitimate texts which can speak this voice; he hears it in books by saints and philosophers and photographers.

Encountering Christ in his reading is only one, albeit the highest, example of Merton encountering in his reading living people with whom he feels a "interior bond," who bring him messages, or act as living personal acquaintances.[125] At one point, Merton realizes the truth that "people like St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure and Duns Scotus should have told [him] long ago," that the quest for theological insight prepares the mind for infused wisdom and quickens the desire for it.[126] Here he is imaginatively envisioning these long-dead authors as living people who "should have told [him something]."[127] In his discovery of the penitential psalms, which reveal themselves as a message from God when one discovers "how much [one needs] them," he calls John Cassian a "go-between."[128] He says that he has "found [these psalms], and they have found [him]," and Cassian acts as a mediating third-party, who led him providentially to this discovery when he most needed it.[129] Like P. Emmanuel's *Qui est cet Homme?*, these psalms came to him "just at the moment when, [your] very life, it seems, depends on your reading [them]."[130] When he receives a letter from Boris Pasternak, Merton writes that it "confirmed [his] intuition of the deep and fundamental understanding that exists between" them.[131] He says that their "interior bond" is the "only basis of true peace and true community," even though he never met Pasternak personally.[132] For Merton, Pasternak is a "basically religious writer," like Cassian, Scotus, and others, with whom he feels a strong kinship.[133]

This kinship is further elucidated in Merton's relationship with Emily Dickinson, whom he calls his "own flesh and blood."[134] Even though she would not be understood in her own time, and would be "hidden" and refuse "herself completely to everyone who would not appreciate her," she would give "herself completely to people of other ages and places who never saw her," like Merton.[135] He says this experience of finding the nineteenth-century New England recluse is like "hugging an angel."[136] Just as he was "entranced" with Eckhart, a "great man," who had a way of "piercing straight to the heart of the inner life," so too did Merton find himself "attracted" to Julian of Norwich.[137] Stunned by the mystic from the Rhineland and seduced by the fourteenth-century English anchorite, Merton had a proclivity to find living authors in his reading. Julian of Norwich in particular becomes one of

Merton's "best friends," and he thrives on her "wise friendship."[138] In a sudden burst of imaginative insight, Merton sees himself having "long been around her, and hover[ing] at her door, know[ing] that she was one of [his] best friends."[139]

Similarly, Merton makes the 'acquaintance' of Simone Weil, whom he is "finally getting to know" through her biography, and finds he has a "great sympathy for her," even though he "cannot agree with a lot of her attitudes and ideas."[140] So not all of Merton's imagined relationships with authors were perfect match-ups. In a highly illuminating passage reminiscent of his feelings about Dickinson, Merton writes that he finds in Jacques Maritain's *Notebooks* "the simplicity and probity of Jacques himself."[141] Looking at the pictures of Raïssa, Maritain's wife, and her sister Vera Oumansoff, Merton feels that "though [he] never actually met them," they are two people who "loved [him] – and whom [he has] loved."[142] He feels this friendship "through [their] writings and the warmth and closeness that has somehow bound [him] to Jacques and to them."[143] He calls it a kind of "family affection," which "reaches out" to others, like Dom Pierre (Van de Meer).[144] This "family affection" certainly reaches out, and in Merton's journals the "family" of his close friends and family he discovers in reading grows.[145] Merton admits shyly that he is having affairs with some writers like Mai Mai Sze, who "with Nora Chadwick, Eleanor Duckett [becomes] one of [his] secret loves."[146] Similarly, his "heart is with Camus," and Merton's somewhat turbulent relationship with Camus runs through the whole of Volume 6.[147] Whether he found a lover, a friend, or someone to argue with, Merton continually believed in the living presence of the authors he was reading and their deep importance in his life, as monastic life precluded having friends and family in the traditional sense.

"Book Providence"

The deepest and most radical manifestation of Merton reading on this personal level is his concept of "Book Providence," the providential arrival of a text, idea, or personal acquaintance provided for him by Christ as "a light to [his] path."[148] God speaking in St. Theresa, Cassian's help in discovering the penitential psalms, Origen speaking as Christ and the role of books in his conversion has already been touched on in this light.[149] He describes this providential arrival as "a grace" when mentioning Emmanuel Mounier's ideas on Personalism, and he calls the "book on Ikons

from Bob Rambusch" a "great grace"; similarly, Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* is a "great grace on the feast of Saint Anthony!"[150] In a period where he was particularly devoted to the Virgin Mother, he writes that "Our Lady brought [Volume 41 of Denis the Carthusian] along yesterday as a mark of her love and to remind [Merton] that she is [his] guide in the interior life."[151] Just as Raïssa's journal came to him "providentially," so too is Julian of Norwich a "great [...] joy and gift."[152] These books tended to come to him in his hour of need, or when his particular situation demanded external aid. Citing a quotation from Berdyaev's *Slavery and Freedom* about the need to resist the world in order to realize one's personality, Merton writes that "this thought comes to [him] with all the power of a 'message.'"[153] Regarding Dom Leclercq's *Otia Monastica*, Merton writes it is "just what [he has] been needing."[154] Likewise, outside of monastic reading, in Camus Merton also finds in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which he "shied away from before, [...] just what [he needs]."[155] Now it fits his new understanding of his "vocation to be an absurd man," or "at least *to try* to think in some such honest terms."[156]

His heartfelt belief in providence is most clearly revealed in a journal entry from his early days, where he writes that "There are times when ten pages of some book fall under your eye just at the moment when your very life, it seems, depends on your reading those ten pages."[157] In them one finds "the answer to all your most pressing questions." Finding this providential provision in his reading of Pierre Emmanuel's *Qui est cet homme?*, he discovers "what [he] was trying to get obscurely last month out of *Ecclesiastes*." As the "enemy of [his] angelism," Emmanuel has "given" Merton the word "discontinuity" and "reminded" him of what he "already found out" about "isolation being different from solitude." This clearly shows the personification trends discussed above, and also the role of providence in his reading.

Beyond mere pulpy texts, he also believed that the providence of God made itself manifest in other people whom he meets in living encounters. In an account that sounds similar to his description of Origen's *Treatise on Prayer*, Merton hears in the sermon of Fr. John of the Cross a preaching of "the Gospel, not words about the Gospel – or about something more or less remote from the Gospel."[158] Fr. John of the Cross "preached Christ and not himself – or someone else who is not Christ," in a correlative way that "Christ talks and speaks in [*The Treatise on Prayer*]."[159] In Fr.

John of the Cross, Merton hears the "words of Christ," which respond as deeply with him as his "friendship with Christ."[160] In a profound encounter eight years later, with a Sufi from Algeria named Sidi Abdesalam, a "true man of God," Merton feels that Abdesalam "came as a messenger from God," and that he "had this sense" as well.[161] Merton believes the "message" is that it would be "wrong for [them] to be kept here 'in prison,'" and that he was "supposed to go out," meaning travel.[162] Merton is content to wait until he knows if it is "clearly God's will," in which case he will "go out."[163] So even though Abdesalam comes with a message, it is perhaps an ambiguous one. However, Merton feels in this encounter, a "sense of God present."[164] In an interesting contrast, Merton, as he catches the "first sight of [the] mountains of Alaska," muses that perhaps he came to Alaska "in answer to someone's prayer."[165] For Merton, his own experiences and all of his encounters with others, whether in living moments of interaction or through the medium of books, came through the benevolent will of God.

Conclusions

With these four modes of reading, Merton changed the magnification of his spiritual microscope from a narrow focus on a short text (*lectio divina*) to a broader focus on an entire text or texts (summary reading), either for intellectual exercise or spiritual edification. Yet, as mentioned in the opening of this essay, there is a countervailing tendency to throw away reading in disgust. Reading, to him, can become a distraction, a nuisance, a lot of ideas about reality, experience or God. This tendency, which would last throughout his life, makes him hesitant and frustrated with the very task which consumed so much of his time.

From mid-June to late-October of 1948, this frustration made itself acutely present. Earlier, in October 1947, he writes that he feels he should spend "more time praying in Church," the "best thing" he can do, instead of "wasting time in books [he doesn't] need to read."[166] His time is a precious resource, and in this example time is being wasted for personal pursuits instead of being invested in the monastic life of prayer in solitude. Later he muses if "too much technical theology" is "deadening [his] interior life without [his] realizing it."[167] Reading becomes an impediment, an obstacle to spiritual attainment in this example. This disgust with his "greed for books and writing," which unduly "compli-

cate [his] life," is seen as a personal failing; he has "eaten many books," a mark of his pride, which were read for his "own satisfaction."[168] In a strikingly confessional entry, he sees reading's role as obstacle in the interior life: "Still, what can I do but remain tranquil and resigned and keep my soul in silence, and recognize this truth, and wait upon God's will, and not confuse my inner life with too much reading and too many choices and too many desires and too many problems."[169] Here the monastic goals of simplicity and silence are disturbed and frustrated by the intellectual's grasping, explorative mind. The demon of pride is exorcised by partaking less in the pleasure of reading to expand one's personal knowledge.

The turmoil he finds himself in throughout this period is exacerbated after he reads a passage on poverty by Saint Francis. In accord with the monastic ideal of poverty, the deep spiritual poverty that would fascinate Merton, he feels the urge to get "rid of a lot of things [he doesn't] really need," presumably that would include the too much reading mentioned only two months prior.[170] He wants to "get out of so much writing and try to live more simply" by engaging in field labor, which he misses.[171] Exasperated by his reading and work and writing, he feels there is "no sense" in "all the elaborate reading [he does], all [his] fussing with architecture and poetry and all the rest of it," because that is "not what [he is] here for."[172] His true desire is to be "little and hidden and poor," not complicated by ideas and criticism and arguments found in his reading.[173] A month later, he writes that he "wasted almost the whole morning" reading in the Scriptorium.[174] He has "less and less desire to read anything about anything," because "all [he] need[s]" is a book about prayer or the Bible to give him "one sentence as a spring board for meditation," a reference to *lectio divina*.[175] In the final entry of this tumultuous period, he writes that it is "very hard for [him] to read anything"; he "watched the rain falling" and "burned with the love of God in silence and joy," and even though he "held a book in [his] hand," he "couldn't read more than a few lines."[176] This early struggle with his reading was particularly acute, yet similar struggles would continue to crop up throughout his life.

He often calls reading a waste of time, a non-edifying enterprise which distracts him from his monastic calling for silence and simplicity. He writes that he wishes he had "only spent the time on Scripture [he] wasted on Duns Scotus," an activity that was not

"essentially useless," even though he "really never got around to understanding more than a tenth of what [he] read with so much labor."[177] He believes in the "[n]ecessity of the Bible," and he needs "[m]ore and more of it," instead of other distracting reading.[178] Sometimes his wasted time is seen too late, as in Morris West's *Shoes of the Fisherman*, which he "[w]asted [his] time reading."[179] In sapping his time and energy, his reading is dangerous if done on inappropriate or poorly written texts which do not edify; they become wasteful and damaging.

Moreover, he also sees this proclivity to flee into books, instead of working in silence and prayer, as a personal failing that he grapples with throughout his life. Instead of "seeking refuge in a book," he lets his soul "grind away at itself for an hour," in an effort to address the "old, old question" of "what shall [he] be?"[180] On the one hand is the painful and exhaustive process of self-examination in silence and prayer, and on the other hand is the flight into reading as a superficial balm. His tendency for the latter has to be counterbalanced by a direct assertion of the former. He writes that he is "too obsessed with the reading" he has been doing, during which he was "fruitlessly lost" most of the time.[181] His recurring "greed for books" manifests itself when in 1959 he questions what he "*really* need[s]," the first of which is to be "free from the *need* of [...] new books."[182] Cleaning up his office, the source of the introductory quotation to this article, makes him vow to "not forget" the "awful, automatic worried routine of piling up books, sorting papers, tearing some up, mailing them out, etc."[183] The clutter and confusion of his troubled experience with reading, his "intellectual gluttony" needs to be purged for a calmer, simpler, more silent life.[184]

An older Merton would tend to read less and less, as this conflict with reading eventually evened itself out somewhat. Even though several months at the hermitage have not settled the "great conflict in [him]," he muses over the first few months there, when he did "too much excited reading of too many things," and when his life was "grossly overstimulated" for a hermit.[185] In late October 1965, in light of this experience, he is "[r]eading slower and less."[186] He wants to "cut down on the ceaseless movement of books back and forth" in late 1965, and, two years later, is edified by reading "less and less" to combat being "intellectually overfed ... in the mornings."[187] Instead he reads "almost nothing at all in the early morning," and even though he "like[s]" the reading he is

doing, he has "to stop."[188] Here he is addressing the problem of overstimulation and tries to correct it by deliberately slowing himself down. Similarly, he "couldn't read a line of [Buber's *Ten Rungs*]," because he feels "utterly blank."[189] Three months later he writes that he "[doesn't] read much these days," and prefers to spend his time with the *Ashtavakra Gita*, which is "very much what [he] ha[s] been reading."[190] In late May 1968, he writes that he needs "[n]ot simply to be quiet [...] to pray, to read" but to effect a "change and transformation" deep within himself, not through a deliberate "special project" of "work[ing] on [himself]," but to be content with his situation and "go for walks, live in peace, let change come quietly and invisibly on the inside."[191] The fever of his earlier tortured conflict with reading had softened into an awareness of the tension without overcompensating in either direction. Even though he felt at points "too restless to do much reading," he had learned to address the tension within him and how to correct the imbalance reading could create in him.[192] The later Merton, learning from the torment of the early years, was careful to balance reading and experience, and not get lost in an obsessive commitment to the former with detrimental consequences for the latter.

The evidence assembled here sheds light on the world of Merton as reader, a world marked by the paradox of reading as necessity and frivolity and the tension between spiritual practice and intellectual learning. Compelled by an honest and burning love for God in personal experience, he entered the monastery, yet his intellectual curiosity, one of his greatest attributes, would prove to be an obstacle when not carefully attended to. This conflict, which he had "not yet fully faced" by 1965, would not be fully resolved before his death in 1968.[193] Even in Asia, his self-proclaimed homeland, his reading style, mostly characterized by brief quotations, fluctuated wildly between distant scholarly engagement with his reading and his emotional warmth for the living texts of the Buddhists and Hindus he met.[194] The matrix of reading styles that characterized his life presented tempting options to better understand himself, the world, and God. And yet the clearer understanding he sought fueled his intellectual and spiritual wanderlust through the matrix of reading styles exposed here. His final resolution, if it can be so called, was not a "[settling] of the great affair" of his struggle with reading.[195] Instead, it was a tense equilibrium, where reading was carefully balanced as both the in-

tellectual activity of a curious mind and the spiritual practice of a man seeking God.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life* (Journal 3: ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 246.

2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals 5: ed. Robert E. Daggy, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 280.

3. Journals Vol. 3, p. 246.

4. Journals Vol. 5, p. 280.

5. Journals Vol. 5, p. 280.

6. Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham UP, 1961), p. 65.

7. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer* (Journals 2: ed. Jonathan Montaldo, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 239.

8. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals 1: ed. Patrick Hart, O.S.C.O, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 344. All quotations from this paragraph are drawn from this source.

9. Journals, Vol. 2, p. 348.

10. Journals Vol. 2, p. 349-50.

11. Jean Leclercq, "Lectio Divina" *Worship* 58 (May 1984), p. 240, 248.

12. Journals Vol. 3, 188. All quotations from this paragraph are drawn from this source.

13. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (Journals Vol. 6: ed. Christine M. Bochen, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 170.

14. Other notable examples of the influence of *lectio divina* on Merton's reading habits can be found in his rumination on Job 12-3 on 13 September 1964 (Vol. 5, 144-5) and his reflection on Ezekiel 32 on 12 November 1965 (Vol. 5, 315), both of which exhibit a tendency to isolate a short passage and find in it personal significance.

15. Journals Vol. 1, p. 248.

16. Journals Vol. 1, p. 248.

17. Journals Vol. 1, p. 248.

18. Journals Vol. 1, p. 249.

19. Journals Vol. 1, p. 248.

20. Journals Vol. 3, p. 256.

21. Journals Vol. 3, p. 256.

22. In late September and early October 1959, Merton also transcribes brief selections from the Russian theologian Paul Evdokimov in a manner which shows signs of influence from *lectio divina* (Vol. 3, 330 and 334).

23. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (Journals 4: ed. Victor A. Kramer, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 112.

24. Journals Vol. 4, p. 113.

25. Journals Vol. 4, p. 113.

26. For other examples of Merton finding worthwhile information in otherwise poor texts, e.g., "in general magnificent!" in *Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 286-87; see Vol. 2: p. 69 and p. 208; Vol. 3: p. 286; Vol. 5: p. 45, p. 193 and pp. 286-7; Vol. 6: p. 154; Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (Journals 7, ed. Patrick Hart, O.S.C.O. New York: HarperCollins, 1998): p. 35, p. 55 and p. 118.

27. Journals Vol. 2, p. 353.

28. Journals Vol. 2, p. 353.

29. Journals Vol. 2, p. 353.

30. Journals Vol. 5, p. 55.

31. Journals Vol. 5, p. 55.

32. Journals Vol. 5, p. 55.

33. Journals Vol. 5, p. 255.

34. Journals Vol. 6, p. 86.

35. Journals Vol. 6, p. 86.

36. Journals Vol. 6, p. 117.

37. Journals Vol. 6, p. 117.

38. Journals Vol. 2, p. 105.

39. Journals Vol. 2, p. 105.

40. Journals Vol. 3, p. 376.

41. Journals Vol. 3, p. 377.

42. Journals Vol. 3, p. 377.

43. Journals Vol. 3, p. 379.

44. Journals Vol. 4, p. 24.

45. Journals Vol. 4, p. 202.

46. Journals Vol. 4, p. 249.

47. Journals Vol. 5, p. 30.

48. Journals Vol. 4, p. 42.

49. Journals Vol. 4, p. 42.

50. Journals Vol. 4, p. 66.

51. Journals Vol. 5, p. 149.

52. Journals Vol. 5, p. 149.

53. Journals Vol. 2, p. 403.

54. Journals Vol. 3, p. 109.

55. Journals Vol. 3, p. 204.

56. Journals Vol. 5, p. 52.
57. Journals Vol. 6, p. 112.
58. Journals Vol. 2, p. 73.
59. Journals Vol. 2, p. 73.
60. Journals Vol. 2, p. 73.
61. Journals Vol. 4, p. 322.
62. Journals Vol. 4, p. 322.
63. Journals Vol. 5, p. 12.
64. Journals Vol. 5, p. 12.
65. Journals Vol. 5, p. 12.
66. Journals Vol. 5, p. 38.
67. Journals Vol. 6, p. 312.
68. Journals Vol. 6, p. 312.
69. Journals Vol. 6, p. 312.
70. Journals Vol. 6, p. 343.
71. Journals Vol. 4, p. 19.
72. Journals Vol. 4, p. 304.
73. Journals Vol. 4, p. 304.
74. Journals Vol. 6, p. 6.
75. Journals Vol. 7, p. 259.
76. Journals Vol. 7, p. 325.
77. See Journals Vol. 1, pp. 83-6.
78. This trend appears throughout Volume 1: see p. 275 and p. 328 on Bonaventure and Thomas, and p. 352 on Bernard's concept of charity.
79. Journals Vol. 2, p. 266.
80. Journals Vol. 2, p. 269-70.
81. For further examples of this trend, see Merton's dissection of Merleau-Ponty's argument in Vol. 5: p. 51, pp. 62-4, his break-down of contradiction in Nishida in Vols. 6, p. 10, and his patient untangling of the meaning of Madhyamika in Vol. 7, p. 260.
82. Journals Vol. 3, p. 216.
83. Journals Vol. 1, pp. 297-8.
84. Journals Vol. 2, p. 344.
85. Journals Vol. 3, p. 89.
86. Journals Vol. 4, pp. 343-4.
87. Journals Vol. 6, p. 31-32.
88. Journals Vol. 6, p. 194.
89. Journals Vol. 6, p. 197.
90. Monica Furlong, *Thomas Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 297.
91. Journals Vol. 3, p. 94.
92. Journals Vol. 3, p. 95.
93. Journals Vol. 3, p. 95.

94. Journals Vol. 3, pp. 94-5.
95. Journals Vol. 3, p. 293.
96. Journals Vol. 3, p. 294.
97. For further examples of this trend, beyond those listed here, see Vol. 2, p. 390; Vol. 3, p. 124 and pp. 144-5.
98. Journals Vol. 1, p. 135.
99. Journals Vol. 1, p. 135.
100. Journals Vol. 1, p. 136.
101. Journals Vol. 4, p. 278.
102. Journals Vol. 6, p. 165.
103. Journals Vol. 6, p. 165.
104. Journals Vol. 3, p. 292.
105. Journals Vol. 4, p. 156.
106. Journals Vol. 5, p. 162.
107. See his praise of Faulkner's "The Bear" in Vol. 6, p. 166, and *As I Lay Dying* in Vol. 6, p. 281.
108. Journals Vol. 2, p. 195.
109. Journals Vol. 2, p. 384.
110. Journals Vol. 2, p. 384.
111. Journals Vol. 3, p. 179.
112. Journals Vol. 3, p. 288.
113. Journals Vol. 3, p. 389.
114. Journals Vol. 6, p. 92.
115. Journals Vol. 6, p. 92.
116. Journals Vol. 1, p. 98.
117. Journals Vol. 1, p. 98.
118. Journals Vol. 1, p. 455.
119. Journals Vol. 3, p. 64.
120. Journals Vol. 3, p. 64.
121. Journals Vol. 3, p. 64.
122. Journals Vol. 3, pp. 182-3.
123. Journals Vol. 3, p. 182.
124. Journals Vol. 3, p. 183.
125. Journals Vol. 3, p. 223.
126. Journals Vol. 2, p. 136.
127. Journals Vol. 2, p. 136.
128. Journals Vol. 3, p. 38.
129. Journals Vol. 3, p. 38.
130. Journals Vol. 2, p. 435.
131. Journals Vol. 3, p. 223.
132. Journals Vol. 3, p. 223.
133. Journals Vol. 3, p. 223.
134. Journals Vol. 3, p. 364.

135. Journals Vol. 3, p. 364.
136. Journals Vol. 3, p. 364.
137. Journals Vol. 4, p. 137, p. 173.
138. Journals Vol. 4, p. 189.
139. Journals Vol. 4, p. 189.
140. Journals Vol. 5, p. 212.
141. Journals Vol. 5, p. 235.
142. Journals Vol. 5, p. 235.
143. Journals Vol. 5, p. 235.
144. Journals Vol. 5, p. 235.
145. Journals Vol. 5, p. 235.
146. Journals Vol. 5, p. 255.
147. Journals Vol. 6, p. 154.
148. Journals Vol. 6, p. 185.
149. See Vol. 1, p. 98, p. 455; Vol. 3, p. 38, p. 64.
150. Journals Vol. 3, p. 71, p. 142, p. 370.
151. Journals Vol. 2, p. 220.
152. Journals Vol. 4, p. 281, p. 173.
153. Journals Vol. 3, p. 205.
154. Journals Vol. 5, p. 157.
155. Journals Vol. 6, p. 86.
156. Journals Vol. 6, p. 86.
157. Journals Vol. 2, p. 435. All quotations from this paragraph are drawn from this source.
158. Journals Vol. 3, p. 186.
159. Journals Vol. 3, p. 186, p. 64.
160. Journals Vol. 3, p. 186.
161. Journals Vol. 6, p. 152.
162. Journals Vol. 6, p. 152.
163. Journals Vol. 6, p. 153.
164. Journals Vol. 6, p. 153.
165. Journals Vol. 7, p. 182.
166. Journals Vol. 2, p. 128.
167. Journals Vol. 2, p. 162.
168. Journals Vol. 2, pp. 210-11.
169. Journals Vol. 2, p. 215.
170. Journals Vol. 2, p. 230.
171. Journals Vol. 2, p. 230.
172. Journals Vol. 2, p. 230.
173. Journals Vol. 2, p. 230.
174. Journals Vol. 2, p. 239.
175. Journals Vol. 2, p. 239.
176. Journals Vol. 2, p. 240.

177. Journals Vol. 2, p. 345.
178. Journals Vol. 3, p. 135.
179. Journals Vol. 5, p. 17.
180. Journals Vol. 3, p. 261.
181. Journals Vol. 4, p. 122.
182. Journals Vol. 2, p. 211; Vol. 3, p. 318.
183. Journals Vol. 5, p. 280.
184. Journals Vol. 5, p. 306.
185. Journals Vol. 5, p. 310.
186. Journals Vol. 5, p. 310.
187. Journals Vol. 5, p. 333; Vol. 7, p. 18.
188. Journals Vol. 7, p. 18.
189. Journals Vol. 7, p. 47.
190. Journals Vol. 7, p. 82.
191. Journals Vol. 7, p. 113.
192. Journals Vol. 7, p. 162.
193. Journals Vol. 5, p. 280.
194. Journals Vol. 7, p. 205.
195. Journals Vol. 7, p. 205.