

The Persistence of Harlem in the Life and Legacy of Thomas Merton

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One summer night in a year America would go to war, Thomas Merton stood in an unfamiliar and probably dingy room in upper Manhattan, sorting women's dresses and shoes. The room was a clothing-strewn, street-level storefront in a tenement building on 135th Street in Harlem, and by the time Merton had finished his sorting, his hands were "thick with the gray dirt" left by the whitening used on the shoes.¹ In his journal the following day, he wrote: "You don't get sentimental or exalted, sorting dresses in an old store in a tenement. You work . . . there is nothing aesthetic about it" (*RM* 385).

In many ways Merton's life had been more aesthetic than practical up to that point, more abstract and philosophical than concrete and real. Even the previous work he had done – writing and teaching – had been more mental than physical. And his previous experiences of Harlem had all been, to some extent, "aesthetic." During his days at Columbia College in the 1930s, he'd traveled the short distance north to Harlem's Apollo Theater to listen to jazz musicians. Later, while living in lower Manhattan, he'd wandered the Harlem nights in the footsteps of poet Federico Garcia Lorca, listening as "black men, befuddled, went wailing" in a place where "under the skins, blood is raging."² Garcia Lorca's depictions of African-American life were gritty in places, even grotesque, but mostly they were surreal. They left an impression on Merton, but it was an intellectual impression, an "aesthetic" impression, not the kind that comes from personal experience – the kind that can change a life.

It wasn't until Merton touched those dresses, felt the dirt from those shoes, and saw the people his sorting efforts were helping, that he understood at a deeper level – the level of empathy and compassion – what actual poverty and degradation were like: the unsentimental conditions of daily Harlem life. It wasn't until he saw with his eyes and felt in his heart what it meant to be truly broken in spirit that he could let go of his

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), 384 [8/15/41]; subsequent references will be cited as "*RM*" parenthetically in the text..

2. Federico Garcia Lorca, *Poet in New York*, trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Grove Press, 1955) 21.

theoretical view of himself and others. Harlem, he saw, like the monastery he was longing to enter, was a world set apart, but “it was a world more real and more concrete than a monastery, in which the imitation of Christ was literal and actual.”³ Merton spent only a handful of nights in Harlem that summer of 1941, but what he experienced there deeply impacted his life, altering his understanding not only of poverty but also of what sociologists call *the other*.

In *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, Paul Elie calls Merton’s announcement to his friends in the fall of 1941 that he was going to “live in Harlem for good. . . . certainly the most surprising twist in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. After two hundred pages of medieval Catholicism, grounded in the distinctions of scholastic philosophy,” Elie writes, “suddenly Merton is asking blunt questions: Shouldn’t the imitation of Christ consist in living the way Christ lived, nothing less, nothing more? Why don’t Christians love their neighbors as themselves, as the Gospel instructs? Where are the saints, not to minister to the poor, but to do away with poverty?” (Elie 129).

Suddenly poverty, which Merton has hardly touched on before, has become the most important consideration in his life. This is even truer in the journal entries written during and after his time in Harlem. On September 1, 1941, for example, shortly after leaving Harlem, he sets down a long reflection on laws meant to feed the poor (see *RM* 389-91). And on September 4, after musing about suffering and tribulation, he writes: “I am disgusted to read myself writing like an ascetic when I have never suffered anything or denied myself anything” (*RM* 401). Later in this same entry he tells himself that he should seek to become “totally, voluntarily” poor before asking God to bless him with the kind of suffering that will make him rely on God alone. In a brief amount of time poverty has become his shorthand, his touchstone, for faith itself, a sign of one’s willingness to give himself freely and absolutely to God.

So how did the change, the “surprising twist” Elie notes, come about? And how did it affect Merton’s life? It began in a confluence of events. Merton had spent Easter week in 1941 on retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani and emerged wanting to become a Trappist – if that was God’s will and if the past that had prevented him earlier from becoming a Franciscan didn’t keep him out of this order, too. His desire to become a Trappist was so strong that he was afraid to ask either the Gethsemani abbot or his own spiritual director, Father Philotheus Boehner, to render a ruling on his fit-

3. Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003) 129; subsequent references will be cited as “Elie” parenthetically in the text.

ness for becoming a monk. He feared, as he writes in the *The Seven Storey Mountain*, “an ultimate refusal.”⁴ And so he returned to his teaching at St. Bonaventure College and bided his time, until a woman who worked in Harlem, a formidable figure with steely convictions, thrust her cause and her presence into his life. Faced suddenly with the chance and the challenge to move beyond his comfortable life, he felt compelled to act.

As he tells the story in his autobiography, Merton was climbing the stairs in St. Bonaventure’s Alumni Hall to see who the campus lecturer was that evening when he heard someone “speaking with great vehemence” (*SSM* 340). Stepping into the theater on the second floor, he saw a woman “dressed in clothes that were nondescript and plain, even poor,” whose strong opinions were having a powerful effect on the priests and nuns in attendance. He knew right away that this was the Baroness Catherine de Hueck, “who was working among the Negroes in Harlem” (*SSM* 340).

Whatever Merton thought working among that population meant, he was unprepared for the Baroness’s message, which she delivered in simple, blunt words. If Catholics “were able to see Harlem, as they ought to see it, with the eyes of faith,” she said, “they would not be able to stay away from such a place. Hundreds of priests and lay-people would give up everything to go there and try to do something to relieve the tremendous misery, the poverty, sickness, degradation and dereliction of a race that was being crushed and perverted, morally and physically, under the burden of a colossal economic injustice” (*SSM* 341).

Her arguments alone were convincing, but it was the Baroness’s manner, her *presence*, that made the greater impact on Merton. Here, he thought, was a woman living “the pure essence of the Franciscan apostolate of poverty, without the vows taken by the Friars Minor” (*SSM* 343). Here was a woman risking her life for the Gospel – a woman truly living her faith. When he ran into her again the next day, he asked if he could join her that summer. “‘Sure,’ she said, ‘come on’” (*SSM* 344).

Although she was born into a wealthy Orthodox family in Russia, Catherine de Hueck always felt a particular compassion for the poor. While still a young girl, she took down a crucifix and tried to clean the blood from Jesus’s body, hoping thereby to alleviate his suffering – a suffering she came to associate with that of the poor. After seeing the horrors of World War I up-close as a nurse and then fleeing the Bolshevik Revolution, she converted to Catholicism in England and worked in Canada as a laundress, a maid and a waitress, striving to feed her son and her ailing husband. When troubles in her marriage led to divorce (and then

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 333: subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.

annulment), she found herself able to earn much more than she needed giving lectures about her life. She could have settled into a comfortable routine, but the thought of Jesus' call to the rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor tormented her until she did exactly that. Moving into a Toronto slum, she committed herself to serving whatever needs were right in front of her. In time she moved to Harlem to do the same thing there and her efforts grew into the wide-ranging services of the lay mission called Friendship House.⁵

But Friendship House wasn't just another Christian charity helping the poor. According to historian Karen Joy Johnson, the Baroness and those who gathered around her believed that the primary duty of American Catholics was, as the Baroness put it, to "liberate Christ in the Negro."⁶ It was more than being poor that made the African Americans in Harlem her target; it was their societal condition, their unique position as America's most destitute and despised.

"It is quite conceivable," she wrote, "that [Christ would say to an American Catholic] I was hungry for the justice of my Father and you did not give me to eat. And I was thirsty for friendship and understanding and you did not give me to drink. And I was naked of any privileges and rights belonging to me as a human being such as the right to work, the right to the pursuit of happiness, and you did not clothe me with them. And I was in prison, the bars of which were made not of iron or steel but prejudice and discrimination, and you neither broke those bars nor visited me. And I was sick with despair and loneliness and you did not minister unto me" (Johnson 58). In answer to the sinner's question of when he had seen these needs and left them untended, Christ would then say, "I was in the American Negro, and you – you were a white American Catholic" (Johnson 59).

During the two weeks he worked in Harlem, Merton was immersed in this spirit as well as a related belief: that one could only truly serve the black poor – the person of Christ – if one became indigent oneself. In the days and then weeks after he left Harlem at the end of that August, Merton felt an almost unbearable pressure to do something other than what he was doing. Teaching at St. Bonaventure, he wrote, was only "a sort of harmless hobby: about on the plane of stamp-collecting."⁷ Although he

5. See madonnahouse.org/doherty (accessed 14 June 2015).

6. Karen Joy Johnson, "Healing the Mystical Body: Catholic Attempts to Overcome the Racial Divide in Chicago, 1930-1948," in *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 58; subsequent references will be cited as "Johnson" parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton to Catherine de Hueck, Nov. 10, 1941, in Thomas Merton and

appreciated the peacefulness in his life, the chance to pray quietly and go to Mass without the world's needs intruding, he felt increasingly that he had to give himself more completely to God, to lose the things that kept him from living by faith alone. He still held out hope that he could become a Trappist, but under the Baroness's influence, he began to believe that he was being called to Harlem. "It is no use waiting now," he wrote in his journal on November 4; "I desire very much to begin to live in poverty, more than anything on earth. And this is a chance, and I pray that I may take it, and not lose it, and begin now to really follow Christ as He told us to" (RM 451).

Six days later, he sent a letter to the Baroness, implying without clearly stating that he would be returning to Harlem. "This is all the more remarkable because my body is terrifically afraid," he wrote.

Afraid of bedbugs. Afraid of exchanging this nice healthy mountain for a slum full of pestilences. Afraid of being cold and hungry. Afraid of losing all the nice consolations, the quiet and good and fruitful kind of prayer that is possible here. Afraid I may never write anything decent again. Afraid of being beaten up. Etc. You can't guess the number of things I am afraid of, or maybe you can. I guess everybody is afraid of the same things. But none of these fears have any power as a reasonable argument as to what is God's will, which seems to be quite clearly that I must face them: and if it is God's will that I face them, He will make it His affair to see that I get through things that I would run a million miles from, left to myself. Saying it all over bluntly: my whole nature is completely horrified at the idea of living in Harlem, and yet what my nature has to say on this subject does not seem, right now, to have much meaning.⁸

Merton, of course, didn't return to Harlem to face his fears or learn to rely solely on God in that place. On November 27, after numerous journal entries about his desire to give himself over to Holy Poverty and "prayer, meditation, writing, work" (RM 451; see also RM 447-48) – usually in that order – he finally put the question to himself straight: "should I be going to Harlem or the Trappists?" He still didn't know if becoming a Trappist was even an option, but he seemed ready at last to face his fear of an

Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty*, ed. Robert A. Wild (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009) 18.

8. Thomas Merton to Catherine de Hueck, Nov. 10, 1941, Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY (section omitted in published version of letter).

“ultimate refusal” and find out. On November 27 he wrote in his journal:

If I really had a choice, what would send me to Harlem rather than the Trappists? Would it be the following combination of good and bad reasons: that there would be real poverty (insecurity) but also I would be independent, continue to write, be able to circulate in the world and its life . . . but be able to help people and work in a place which cries out for help. The good reasons do not apply only to Harlem. I would have to renounce perhaps *more* to enter the Trappists. That would be the one place where I would give up *everything*. Also, anyone who believes in the Mystical Body of Christ realizes I could do as much for the Church and my brothers in the world at Gethsemani, as in Harlem. (*RM* 455-56)

The poverty he ultimately gave himself over to was an absolute poverty lived in physical isolation from, rather than proximity to, those in the world who weren't fellow monks – a devotion to God in solitude and contemplation rather than charity and ministry. But as his descriptions of Harlem in *The Seven Storey Mountain* (descriptions the Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver thought as powerful as “the words of any spokesman of the oppressed in any land”⁹) and his later turn back toward the world make clear, Harlem and the manner of serving Christ it offered had lodged themselves deeply inside him. They had, in fact, profoundly transformed him, showing him that poverty meant more than simply not having possessions, that following Jesus meant more than saving his own soul, and that he could not look for the answers to existential questions only in his own experience and understanding.

Perhaps nothing he wrote about Harlem expressed its effect on him as well as his description of an old black woman – “thin, quiet, worn out, dying of cancer” – who lived in the same building as many of the Friendship House workers and was said to have visions of the Virgin Mary (see *SSM* 348). It was this woman, he says in his November 30 journal entry, who made him think about staying in Harlem in the first place (see *RM* 464). “The only time I spoke to her and got a good look at her,” he wrote,

I realized one thing: she possessed the secret of Harlem, she knew the way out of the labyrinth. For her the paradox had ceased to exist, she was no longer in the cauldron, except by the pure accident of physical presence, which counts for nothing since the cauldron is almost entirely of the moral order. And when I saw her and spoke to her, I saw in this tired, serene, and holy face the patience and joy of the

9. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968) 35.

martyrs and the clear, unquenchable light of sanctity. She and some other Catholic women were sitting on chairs by the doorsteps of the building, in the relatively cool street, in the early evening: and the group they made, there, in the midst of the turmoil of the lost crowd, astounded the passer-by with the sense of peace, of conquest: that deep, deep, unfathomable, shining peace that is in the eyes of Negro women who are really full of belief! Seeing the boys and girls in the library, I had got some insight into the problem of Harlem. Here, just across the street, I saw the solution, the only solution: faith, sanctity. It was not far to seek. (SSM 348)

The solution Merton found in the woman's face wasn't just to the problems of Harlem but also, and even more, to the question of how to live in a world that is selfish, discriminatory, corrupt and violent. It wasn't an abstract solution, an intellectual solution, or even a corporate one. It was an individual solution, for both the woman and for him: patience and faith and joy and sanctity. And it was significant, both then and later, that he had found it in the face of a sick old woman in the most neglected neighborhood in the country, the black face of one of the least exalted people he had ever seen: poor, despised and other. Merton's most powerful descriptions of Harlem – the ones that impressed Eldridge Cleaver – are general and synoptic, but his description of this one woman without a name is singular and specific. Her face was still vivid to him when he wrote his autobiography five years later and, I believe, in the years after that when he turned again toward the world.

Merton never directly credited his time in Harlem with helping him see the needs of the oppressed people who, in the '50s and '60s, rose up in Asia and Latin America and on the streets of our own country to fight for equal rights. But there can be little doubt that his Harlem encounters with the poor and despised, like the unnamed woman, fueled his call for a sympathetic, moral response. It wasn't just that he'd had flesh-and-blood encounters with people his native culture – the dominant American white culture – had long defined, generally and abstractly, as inferior. It was also that he had come to understand what true poverty and humility were, and he had embraced them, thereby relinquishing the supposed superiority and authority his whiteness gave him.

In *Orientalism*, the 1978 book that helped establish the post-colonialist concept of "the other" in sociological and literary circles, Edward Said calls "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures" the main reason for the "us" vs. "them" mentality that has long dominated relations between developed and

developing countries.¹⁰ This is more than a political identity, Said says. It is also a cultural one, embedded so securely in our Western thinking that we cannot see those of other races and geographical areas as anything but inferior, no matter how enlightened we think we are. In fact, he writes, this idea is central to our understanding of ourselves. “European culture gained in strength and identity,” he writes, “by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (Said 3). It doesn’t take much thought or transference to see that his description of European ideas about and relations with the Orient also describes white America’s attitudes and approaches to black America. Central to this kind of superior self-definition is the idea that those who differ from “us” in some external way are also different from us in constitution and ability: we are we, an exceptional country and culture, and they are “other.”

It is clear from how Merton described his encounters at Friendship House and the thoughts that flowed from them that Harlem helped him see black America as both the suffering extreme of what white American culture does to people and an alternative culture that, despite all it has had to endure, is already superior to white culture. “The most terrible thing about it,” he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, “is that there is not a Negro in the whole place who does not realize, somewhere in the depths of his nature, that the culture of the white men is not worth the dirt in Harlem’s gutters. They sense that the whole thing is rotten, that it is a fake, that it is spurious, empty, a shadow of nothingness” (*SSM* 345-46).

Merton spent only two weeks of evenings in Harlem, yet his time there – his only real exposure to those at the bottom of our economic, social and racial scales – galvanized his understanding of true poverty and humility, the oneness of humanity at the level of the personal encounter, and the often superior contributions those we think of as “other” can make when we allow them equal agency and respect. Even a cursory look at books such as *Seeds of Destruction*,¹¹ *Faith and Violence*¹² or his collected journals will show that these understandings came to full flower in later life. In writing about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his nonviolent approach to the African-American fight for equality, in particular, he states repeatedly that King and his followers were sacrificing themselves for the advancement not only of black Americans but also of white Americans,

10. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 7; subsequent references will be cited as “Said” parenthetically in the text.

11. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964); subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.

12. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

allowing whites to recognize and embrace their better selves. These better selves were not superior to or even different from those of their black sisters and brothers but rather capable of being changed and bettered by their equal participation with others in the Mystical Body of Christ. “To have a vow of poverty seems to me illusory,” Merton writes in his author’s note for *Seeds of Destruction*, “if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to me to be absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God’s will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor” (*SD* xvi).