

My Visits to the Secular Bookhouse

by Thomas Merton

Editor's Note: When I assumed the responsibilities of "Interim Editor" of *The Merton Seasonal* I discovered among the manuscripts pending publication a mimeographed article by Thomas Merton that first appeared in *Staff Log*, published by the Louisville Free Public Library in 1959. Its title "My Visits to the Secular Bookhouse" derives from Trappist sign language: secular bookhouse = public library. Since this little known article reached only a few friends of the Louisville Free Public Library, I thought it would be of interest to readers of *The Merton Seasonal* to see how Merton spent his time in Louisville in those early years, the books he was discovering and the records he was listening to, from Pasternak to the Zen Masters, from Jazz to Eric Satie.

It is astonishing how often Thomas Merton refers to libraries in his journals. At first, it was a brief stop after a doctor's appointment or a stint at a Louisville hospital. He soon became friendly with the library staff, managed to get a library card, and then the books began to flow both ways. Nor did it stop with Louisville; he ventured forth to the University of Kentucky Library in Lexington, Columbia University in New York, Boston College Library and Syracuse. Interestingly enough, all these libraries today have special Merton collections. Being a voracious reader of books on almost any subject under the sun, it really is not too surprising that his references are many to the libraries he frequented or in which he was engaged in a continuing library loan system. It would make an interesting doctoral dissertation.

The universe, say the ancient philosophers of the east, is kept going by the interplay of opposites, balancing one another, completing one another, harmonizing with one another, causing each other to behave:

Existence and non-existence give birth to each other
 The hard and the easy complete each other
 The long and the short are comparatively so . . .

As yang and yin go together, as thesis and antithesis, as hot dog and mustard, so too the irresponsible folly of scholars and writers demands to be compensated for, balanced, neutralized and rendered harmless, even efficacious, by the patience and wisdom of librarians. It has been going on for centuries that way. The process does not seem to be drawing to any kind of a close, thank heaven. It is, as a matter of fact, delightful and consoling. It produces a little circle of calm in the turbulence of each city, a little oasis of good sense in a metropolitan setting where such a luxury is generally lacking.

Without attempting to develop the metaphor further, I will simply recall the first time that Providence deposited this one particular writer in the peaceful silence of the Louisville Library. It was on Palm Sunday, 1941. I was on my way, for the first time, to the Abbey of Gethsemani. Since I had pinned my faith on the old L & N to get me there, I had to wait around until evening. (The modest train could only be persuaded to crawl out of town under cover of darkness).

What does any thinking man do when he finds himself stranded for a day in a strange city? He heads, of course, for the Public Library. So I came past the statue of Lincoln with his head in the branches of the trees, and entered the library. How could I have known at the time that this was going to be one of *the* libraries in my life? That is the way libraries are, though. They ensnare you as you go by immersed in thoughts, and before you know it they have got you for life.

I was there for most of the afternoon. First I looked up Gethsemani in the card file, and as far as I

recall you didn't have anything but the old beat-up pamphlet written by the first Abbot, Dom Eutropius, and reissued by the fourth Abbot, Dom Edmond, at the end of the nineteenth century — the time of the jubilee. I edified myself with the perusal of fifty odd pages of broken English which eulogized the monastic life — little realizing that this was to become for me a career - a way of life: writing broken English about monks. After that I roamed around the Open Shelf Room and came upon a travel book by Evelyn Waugh who had been in Egypt and had seen some Coptic monks in the desert. Waugh does not write broken English. The transparently clear fastidiousness of his prose did not add up, at any point, to a eulogy of monks. I was a little piqued, since I was already professionally predisposed in their favor. How could I have known that about ten years later Waugh and I would meet and agree, in the Abbey of Gethsemani towards which I was then wending my way?

So much for my first visit. My second was nine years later. I had been in St. Joseph's Infirmary, and when I got out I found myself downtown with a friend who insisted that I must see and hear the wonders of the Audio-Visual section of the Library. I did, and was very impressed. In fact, it was there that for the first time I heard the record Robert Speaight had made, reading some of my poems. Later we got one of these records for the monastery, and I think it is still around here somewhere, but nobody would be seen dead playing it.

For a moment I cherished dreams of retiring to one of the booths in the basement of the Library, in the Audio-Visual department, and living the rest of my life there as a hermit, but it seems that this is not part of the library's program. Alas.

Another six or seven years went by just like that, and then, for some reason or other (as most of you have probably reflected with rueful astonishment) I happened to be in the Library quite a lot, once a month, sometimes even more frequently. I will not pause and try to evaluate what all these visits, or perhaps better piratical raids, have amounted to in my own life and work. But perhaps the cumulative effect has been beyond calculation. In partial proof, just look at all the long words I have just used in one short sentence.

Here I ran into Pasternak — the *Selected Works*, not *Zhivago*, which came out later. Here I made the acquaintance of minds like Denis de Rougemont, Koestler, Martin Buber and renewed old interests in Lewis Mumford, Toynbee, the writers of No plays, Japanese and Chinese poets, heaven only knows what. Here the only real frustration I felt (this is no reproach) was that I was just about never able to get hold of any kind of book about this mysterious thing called Zen. But that gap has now been filled as Suzuki has sent me most of his. Then of course there have been delightful hours in the Reference room, wedged into the earphones and barricaded behind a stack of foreign magazines. There, too, it was a question of renewing old acquaintances: on the one hand Eric Satie, Couperin, Rameau, Villa-Lobos, Bartok and on the other Earl (Father, but not Reverend) Hines, Art Tatum . . . why go on? I remember one day when there were some little colored girls in there doing their homework and I couldn't contain my desire to share some of the wonderful piano that was coming over the earphones. It was the kind of piano we called "barrelhouse" in the 30's. So I passed the earphones over to one of them. The child was only mildly entranced, and passed them back saying sweetly: "Well, its *different*." Heck, little girl, it's terrific! But of course I come from a monastery where we don't hear much of that kind of thing and perhaps I'm prejudiced. And maybe, too, there is just a touch of nostalgia for the old days when jazz was jazz and had not turned into this moaning stuff called rock 'n roll which is neither yang nor yin and as far as I am concerned has no place in the universe at all.

So that is partly what has been taking place over the Roman Collar — or one of them — that you sometimes see around. I am grateful for your patience with my frivolities and enthusiasms. I feel deeply indebted to my "secular bookhouse." Oh, I forgot my title: when I come in to town, sometimes there are people in the monastery who make me signs or send notes for things to bring back from the library. For library we make the signs "book" and "house" and for Louisville (or any other ville,) we make the sign for "layman" or "secular." That is how you happen to be "secular bookhouse." I thought it would make a nice title.