

FATHER OF THE MAN:

An Investigation into the Roots of Thomas Merton

—By **D. A. Callard**

The story of Thomas Merton is one of the most remarkable in the history of modern Catholic literary tradition. In common with many others of his time, he was a convert who, prior to conversion, had dabbled on the fringes of Communism and Indian mysticism. His autobiography, *ELECTED SILENCE*, [the British title of *THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN*] makes great play of the bohemian road he abandoned when the Church called and of the fact that Catholicism as depicted by Joyce was a significant intellectual factor in his change of heart. However, his commitment grew eventually to embrace the harsh vows of Trappist monasticism. From this unlikely vantage, he was to become the most effective proselytiser of his generation in over a score of books exploring the mystical tradition, in his own not inconsiderable poetry, and in his several volumes of autobiography. He was a savage critic of contemporary materialism, and there is a pronounced lack of charity in his writing toward individuals and groups whom he judges as having too little regard for matters of the spirit.

That the extremity of his commitment was largely due to the confused circumstances of his upbringing is hinted at in his major autobiography, *ELECTED SILENCE*. "A man who has just come out of the hospital, having nearly died there, and having been cut into pieces on an operating table, cannot immediately begin to lead the life of an ordinary working man. And after the spiritual mangle I have gone through, it will never be possible for me to do without the sacraments daily, and without much prayer and penance and meditation and mortification."

Thomas Merton was born in Prades, in the South of France, to Owen Merton, a New Zealand-born artist, and his American wife, Ruth Jenkins. 1915 was not a very auspicious year of birth in a country where the armies of Europe were enmeshed in mud only several hundred miles distant, and it was a poor time to try to make a living as an artist. Owen Merton had left New Zealand for London, and had then gone on to Paris, where he had studied art with Percyval Tudor-Hart between 1911 and 1914. In England, he had achieved some critical success, but in no way had managed to make himself financially independent. The experiment in Prades was a failure, and the couple and their young child came literally close to starvation. In *ELECTED SILENCE*, there is no hint (unsurprisingly, since he probably never knew) of the struggle for mere survival that his parents had before they were baled out financially by the Jenkins's and were able to return to the USA in 1916.

On return they lodged with the Jenkins family, but relations between Owen and his kindly but unimaginative parents-in-law on whom the family were dependent

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became strained. Finally they found their own house, which was little more than a shack, in Flushing, Long Island. Owen Merton attempted to support the family by landscape gardening, work as a church organist and later as a pianist in a local movie theatre. A second child, John Paul was born, but the marriage was beginning to show the strain of unrelenting poverty with no visible end in sight. When Ruth Jenkins died in 1921, Owen's guilt was exacerbated by fears that his inability to support his family may have been largely responsible, and by the knowledge that the marriage had been near to collapse. Thomas Merton barely remembered his mother, but did not remember feeling any fondness for her or great sense of loss. She seems to have been an intellectually-oriented person in contrast to the highly emotional Owen whom he venerated.

Owen was now partly free from family responsibilities which he was both temperamentally and financially unable to sustain. Tom's infant brother was left in the care of the Jenkins's, and Owen and Tom set off for Bermuda where Owen intended to devote himself full-time to painting.

It was in Bermuda that he came into contact with Evelyn Scott. Evelyn had survived a sensational elopement to Brazil with an older married man, where they had eked out a bare subsistence living for five years until the cessation of the First World War allowed them to return to the US. In Greenwich Village, Evelyn had embarked on a series of infidelities which had left Cyril Scott resigned to the fact that theirs was to be an 'open' common-law marriage. Her career as a Villager was spectacular but brief. In the space of two years she published a book of imagist verse, a cause- celebre novel, *THE NARROW HOUSE*, and had a play which revolved around a near-incest theme produced by the Provincetown Players. But she also made a number of highly placed enemies and it was this fact plus the need for a less distracting place of work that caused Evelyn and Cyril Scott to quit New York.

The couple moved at first to the Cape Cod estate of Swinburne Hale and Marie Garland. The latter was a very unconventional millionairess who, over the next decade, was to have a relationship with the Scotts which paralleled that of Mabel Dodge Luhan and the Lawrences. Evelyn was charmed at first by the ambience of the 'large and very beautiful country house surrounded by automobiles and Arcadian millionaire children who go barefoot and wash their own dishes'. But the serpent reared its head and the marriage of the Hale-Garlands collapsed. Swinburne Hale fled to Bermuda and the Scotts followed. Shortly after their arrival, Evelyn wrote to her friend and confidante, Lola Ridge:

"Say, dearest, I almost forgot, another lost soul we are sending you. A little man called Owen Merton, about thirty I should judge, a Scotch Welshman from New Zealand who has been for the last year living in Flushing where his wife recently died and left him with two children. He is very hard up, very naive and genuine, as obscene as Bill Williams [William Carlos Williams, one of Evelyn's Village lovers], and in all respects an interesting child with real if not stupendous talent."

Presently Owen Merton moved in with the Scotts and their seven year old son, Creighton. And, at some unrecorded stage, Evelyn made an apparently amicable switch of partner from Cyril to Owen. Thomas was brought out of the boarding house on the other side of the island to join them and, though he became a close friend of Creighton, took an immediate dislike to Evelyn. Creighton recalled in later years that he would be kept awake at night by Thomas grinding his teeth in frustration at the new domestic order.

Owen's career advanced considerably after an exhibition at the Daniels Gallery in New York, which was a critical and commercial success. Cyril and his new mistress, Owen and Evelyn decided to see Europe. Though Creighton came, Thomas was left behind in Bermuda and in 1923 the group arrived in France.

They settled in Collioure for the summer. It was a nascent art colony, "miserably poor, and now, at the end of summer is haunted by devastated artists who are going to get one picture in the salon before they die or die at once of a starch diet. Some wear Pilgrim Father hair and blue coats, some fence with their palettes, and some trudge to painting armed like Tartarin on his hunting expedition with a meek little wife and three daughters to assist. You never saw so many awful pictures as are being painted in Collioure at the present moment", Evelyn wrote home.

The group was almost as impoverished, and in search of a cheap winter home, travelled down through Spain and came to rest in Bou Saada, Algeria. The other-worldliness of Bou Saada, a small oasis settlement with nothing in the way of distraction, proved to be a spur to creativity. Evelyn commented to Lola Ridge that "just now it is the sense of alienation which is satisfying for one can work in it." According to Thomas Merton in *ELECTED SILENCE*, it was in this period that Owen painted some of the best paintings of his career. Thomas had been boarded with the millionaire Arcadians at Cape Cod for a while but in the winter of 1924 had been returned to his maternal grandparents. Owen was struggling to send back money to the Jenkins's to support his two children, but guilt over his parental failure continued to harass him. It was these practical worries which led to a nervous collapse and a bout of serious illness. He recovered, but his behaviour became increasingly erratic, and the crisis was not far from distant. Evelyn wrote to Lola Ridge:

"...it is all very queer and messed up and maybe ruined love, if you will accept that, for it, what Owen has been through about Tom is as genuine as about me. Tom is a morbid and possessive kid and Owen is made morbid about Tom through various things that occurred in connection with Ruth. Tom is, and will be until he is big enough to be set adrift, a constant obstacle to peace of mind."

After a successful exhibition at the prestigious Leicester Galleries in 1925, Owen returned to New York for a visit and was faced with the paternal responsibilities he had struggled to avoid. The Jenkins family offered to support him until he achieved commercial success as long as he ended his relationship with Evelyn. She and the Jenkins had never met, though Thomas would not have given a glowing report of her. The possibility of regularizing their union by marriage existed, but Owen was still haunted by the spectre of his economic failure with his first wife, and marriage to Evelyn would almost certainly have meant a repetition of the same nightmare. The possibility of marriage was discussed in September 1925 when Evelyn saw Owen, accompanied by Tom, for the last time. The deciding factor against it was the jealous hatred which Tom bore for Evelyn. A year later, Owen Merton wrote to Lola Ridge from the South of France:

"Lola, dear, will you believe my own word on the Gospel that I know I could not have reconciled the question of the children and the question of either living with or marrying Evelyn. Tom's jealousy and irreconcilableness are perfectly enormous. There was no choice except to leave the children altogether - and then every night for the rest of my life would have been hideous with repentance-. Only I see now that for the last eighteen months I was with Evelyn I was in a violently hysterical condition, perhaps controlling it made it more violent. Anyway, when I got to New York I saw that I could never handle the situation."

The decision had not been taken lightly on his part, but it had been the only way out of the impasse. "Lola I must seem the most inhuman monster but I am not. I suffer the tortures of the damned, because I shall never see anyone else but Evelyn — only as I get older will it be easier to show a real devotion."

Thomas Merton lived with Owen for some of the remainder of Owen's life. There was a further major exhibition in 1928 but, though he had the enthusiastic support of Roger Fry, Owen did not break through to critical acceptance before he died in 1931 of a brain tumour. His art is now almost forgotten, and his main legacy to the world was the effect of his life on his son.

Evelyn Scott is not recorded as having met Thomas again, though both were living in New York's Perry Street in the late thirties. By this time, Thomas Merton had already travelled a great distance down the road to Rome. *ELECTED SILENCE* does not mention her by name, though she is referred to occasionally in a way which suggests that the old resentments had not vanished. Thomas Merton's adult perception of his father differs considerably from the figure portrayed in Evelyn Scott's letters and fictional portraits, and from the character which emerges from Owen Merton's own correspondence. In Thomas Merton's memory his father became a Catholic manqué, a man with a priestly dedication to his art:

“My father painted like Cezanne and understood the Southern French landscape as Cezanne did. His vision of the world was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity in each created thing. His vision was religious and clean, and therefore his paintings were without decoration or superfluous comment, since a religious man respects the power of God’s creation to bear witness for itself. My father was a very good artist.”

There is no doubt that art was paramount in Owen Merton’s life. The sanity and artistic balance of his work was never matched in the disorder and confusion of his life however. In France, Evelyn Scott wrote a novel called *THE GREY RIDDLE* which was based directly on Merton’s account of his first marriage and the struggle to combine his artistic vocation with personal responsibility. It was never published, though a manuscript draft is preserved in the Scott Collection in the Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas. ‘Pete Johnston’, the fictionalization of Owen Merton emerges as a complex figure, an ‘unemployable’ except for menial jobs necessary for survival. A more fanciful portrait is drawn in a later novel, *EVA GAY*, in which Merton is depicted as a rather archetypal half-crazed genius, ludicrously named Evan Garrett, ‘a fumbling, brutal and fragmentary man’. Evelyn’s relationship with him seems to have been quasi-maternal, though she was six years his junior.

The obsessive devotion of Thomas Merton to the figure of his father who, on the evidence of *ELECTED SILENCE* seems to have been the only human being he ever loved, defies simple explanation. Like Evelyn Scott’s own son, he found the rigors of a bohemian childhood very confusing. In his autobiography he wrote of his upbringing:

“It is almost impossible to make sense out of the continual rearrangement of our lives and our plans from month to month in my childhood. Yet every new development came to me as a reasonable and worthy change. Sometimes I had to go to school, sometimes I did not. Sometimes father and I were living together, sometimes I was with strangers and only saw him from time to time. People came into our lives and went out of our lives. Things were always changing. I accepted it all. Why should it ever have occurred to me that nobody else lived like that?”

Yet his flight to Roman Catholicism and the extremity of his commitment cannot be reduced in deterministic terms to a counter-revolt against his father’s bohemianism. It is not far-fetched to see in his adoration and idealisation of a man who was a maker of images a reflection of his own devotion to God. The moment of religious experience in a Rome hotel was accompanied by a sense, not of divine imminence, but of the presence of his recently dead father:

“I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden insight into the misery of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realize something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with a horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired liberation from all this with an intensity and an urgency unlike anything I had ever known.”

As a child, Merton evidently shared to a great extent his father’s capacity for violent outbursts and emotional anguish. He must have been aware as he grew older that his father had sacrificed a great love, and perhaps the mainsprings of his creativity, because his infant jealousy demanded that his father’s affections be reserved for himself alone. Did he fear that he, like his father, might grow up a fumbling, brutal and fragmentary man? In the extremity of his surrender to God, Thomas Merton must have hoped to reconcile the warring currents within himself, and so avoid the rocks upon which his father had been so mercilessly broken.