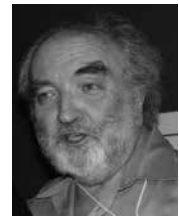


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It was February of 1972, reading week for students at York University in Toronto, and I was spending my first period of time at the Abbey of Gethsemani. I had decided that Merton would be the subject of my doctoral dissertation and I was exploring possibilities in that direction when I alighted on the William Blake and Thomas Merton connection. While at Gethsemani I wrote a paper for a graduate class I was taking with the Jewish poet-scholar Eli Mandel on the visionary tradition in English poetry – Christopher Smart, William Blake, William Butler Yeats – and that essay, conceived and largely written in Merton’s monastic home and subsequently published in *The American Benedictine Review*, became the foundational piece for my doctoral research. In all of this, Patrick Hart, OCSO was the cordial enabler, enthusiastic helper and inspiring Trappist model for a novice scholar. But what I also remember from that first Gethsemani sojourn were the goofy things that plagued me. Being unaccustomed to the Trappist eating regimen – less severe than in the pre-conciliar past but still in play – meant I went hungry for periods of time and my only comfort was to be found in the fruitcake provided by the kitchen. I ate generous portions – too generous. Once, after ingesting a plentiful number of the appetizing filler, I went for a walk in the woods, noticed that I was having some difficulty walking in a straight line, found myself chased by a fierce goose fiercely defending her goslings, scrambled over a fence that brought me mud-drenched staring at uncomprehending cows, only to stumble back to the retreat quarters humiliated, nauseous and perplexed. Brother Patrick met me on my return and commented, unflatteringly direct I thought, that I looked, well, ghastly. I told him what happened and suggested that maybe I was having a breakdown or even a mystical rapture. He inquired how much fruitcake I ate and when I told him he observed that its bourbon-laced ingredients might best explain my sorry state: no mysticism here. Rather, mild intoxication compounded by physical unease generated by climbing over an electric fence. Patrick Hart grounded me in reality. And not for the last time.



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**Michael W.  
Higgins**

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