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Library Notes

The Thomas Merton Collection At The University Of Kentucky

William J. Marshall

The late Dr. Lawrence S. Thompson, Librarian at the University of Kentucky from 1948 to 1963, began to correspond with Thomas Merton in 1951. By that time Merton had written several books on monastic life and history, including his fabled autobiographical account, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. His writings had brought world attention not only to himself but also to the stark monastery of Gethsemani, secluded in the knobs of Kentucky's Nelson County.

On 9 February 1951 Thompson wrote Merton offering to preserve the manuscript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* or some of his other manuscripts.¹ Merton replied thirteen days later explaining that two copies of the manuscript had been sent elsewhere long ago. Although he was intrigued by Thompson's inquiry, it was not, he indicated, "because I want to think of myself as a public figure, planting a sheaf of documents about myself where people can write M.A. theses about me and my masterpieces! But, I do have quite a feeling about being a Kentucky writer." Noting that he had lived in Kentucky longer than anywhere else, he indicated that he would be pleased to comply with the remainder of Thompson's request.²

Stating that he was enclosing some odds and ends, including mimeographed conference notes and a rough draft of a poem, Merton asked, "Do you go in for 'worksheets' like the lads at the University of Buffalo? I sent them a lot of poetry worksheets a couple of years ago. They are especially delighted with anything that is really messy and illegible. Of this I can always furnish an abundance." At the end of the letter Merton asked Thompson whether the library might lend him some books on Kentucky. He also inquired whether Kentucky had ever had a Thoreau. If not,

"I'll try to get Father Abbot to let me bid for the title."³

Thus began a correspondence which spanned a period of eleven years and which was to be responsible for the university's stewardship of approximately seven and a half cubic feet of manuscript and published material on Merton. Michael Mott, Merton's biographer, has described Merton as being "impulsive and generous by nature." With nothing to give away in return for a constant stream of books provided by friends and librarians, he provided them with his own manuscripts, worksheets, carbons, mimeographs, and holographic scraps. The manuscript of the *Seven Storey Mountain* was sent to Boston College, while a carbon copy was given to Sister Therese Lentfoehr, who eventually amassed a rich collection of material now housed at Columbia University.⁴ Other materials found their way to St. Bonaventure, the University of Buffalo (SUNY Buffalo), Boston University, and Marquette University.

Kentucky's Thompson was, not unlike Merton, erudite and gregarious. He corresponded with a large circle of literary friends and associates, and as a by-product of this activity he generated for the library surprising and worthwhile collections of books and manuscripts. Father Louis allowed him to prepare a small exhibit in conjunction with the publication of a new book, *The Ascent of Truth*. Lawrence Thompson suggested to Merton that "what we would particularly like to have are some of the following (if you could extract them from the publisher for us):

1. Your typescript.
2. The original jacket design.
3. Galleys.
4. Correspondence between you and the publisher concerning the editing and production of the book.
5. Publisher's posters and display cards.
6. Any other pertinent materials suitable for display."⁵

Seemingly unfazed by such a tall order, Merton cheerfully replied that he had forwarded Thompson's request to his old Columbia classmate Bob Giroux, who was now Editor in Chief at Harcourt Brace. He stated further, "I am sure he will be glad to send you everything that you want for the exhibit which I feel is an undeserved honor and which I welcome as an opportunity to show that I am part of Kentucky and glad to be so"⁶

A delighted Thompson forwarded several books authored by Kentuckians to Merton and explained that "James Lane Allen was perhaps as close to a Kentucky Thoreau as any writer we have had." Noting that the university had the "largest collection of Kentuckiana . . . that can be found anywhere," he invited Merton and the other monks at Gethsemani to write and request titles at any time.⁷

Merton replied with a bundle of notes and manuscripts which included a fragment from *The Seven Storey Mountain*. "The remarks in pencil," he pointed out, "are observations of the censor. You will be amused." He went on to ask why the University of Kentucky had not started "something ambitious as the *Sewanee Review* or the *Southern Review*? Or the *Virginia Quarterly*? Perhaps you have, since my retirement to Gethsemani!" Noting that he had glanced at Thompson's *Kentucky Poets*, Merton expressed his pleasure with two pieces by "Jesse Stuart with whom I feel a certain kinship—especially in his attitude toward 'The City.' I think there are a lot of people who feel that way in Kentucky and that is probably one of the reasons why the Commonwealth feels like home."⁸

Thompson answered that he was pleased Merton was enjoying the books he had sent him and that the library's collection, which at that time contained over 500,000 volumes, would sufficiently occupy all the time Merton had to devote to Kentucky authors. As for Jesse Stuart, he remarked that he was as productive as Merton. "However, his volubility on the speaker's platform," mused Thompson, "would hardly qualify him for Gethsemani. Jesse is as full of chatter as a magpie, but we love him for it. It is in character."⁹

The university's *Ascent of Truth* exhibition did not materialize until December 1952, because Merton had difficulty freeing the manuscript to be displayed from his publisher. Merton left the manuscript at the university following the showing.¹⁰ Merton also expressed his desire that the library should receive "some interesting manuscript material" forming the basis of his book *The Sign of Jonas*.¹¹ The work, however, which contained published portions from his journal, played havoc with the Cistercian Order's censorship guidelines.¹² With regard to this problem Merton wrote that there was a "question as to how much of the book was absolutely silly and ought to be cut. I do feel that it is full of trivialities, but they are just those trivialities that go to

make life what it is. In the end, I think that nothing in life is trivial, if it is lived for God. But I have no idea whether the book will confirm my belief!"¹³

Nine months later Merton inquired whether anything had come of Thompson's plans to have an exhibit on *The Sign of Jonas*. He apologized for not including the manuscript of the book in the materials sent on its publication and explained that his superiors did not want it to leave Gethsemani for a public exhibit. "There was a lot of worry," he confided, "about the book, officially, within the Order. The thing was considered so unusual."¹⁴

The exchange continued—Thompson forwarded books and other information to Merton on forestry, Thoreau, and South America. Though withdrawn from the world, Merton was not at all isolated from the world of ideas. His network of correspondents, which included Dr. Thompson, could supply him with almost any written work he desired. In return Merton supplied the University Library with a steady stream of material such as manuscripts, worksheets, proofs, and notes from *Bread in the Wilderness*, *No Man is an Island*, *The Strange Islands*, and *Thoughts in Solitude*.¹⁵ Through all of this Merton maintained a self-effacing attitude toward the archives he spread everywhere. In one letter he wrote, "I am sorry that none of this material is of any real value. But I suppose it is just curious enough to arouse a moment's interest in an exhibit. You can keep or throw away what you please of this."¹⁶ In another communication he wrote, "Under separate cover I am sending some mimeographed notes on Genesis which Dr. Thompson might like to add to the rest of the heap that is there"¹⁷

Father Louis, there can be no doubt, sensed the importance both of his activities and the material that emerged as a byproduct of them. In September 1955 he advised Thompson that he had been trying to dispose of some of the letters in his files and that he had finally obtained permission from his publisher friend James Laughlin to send the library his New Directions files. "I hope you will be interested in them," he wrote. "They are all that I have, the earlier New Directions file was lost or destroyed or something, I can't remember. This batch covers mostly the period in which *Bread in the Wilderness* was going through the most incredible hazards."¹⁸

Thompson replied, "We are completely delighted with the New Directions File. This is the sort of thing that completes the picture

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of a writer better than any other type of material. I personally found the letters of greatest intrinsic interest, but the really important thing is the sidelights that they cast on your creative activity. Please accept our thanks for this file, and do try to save anything else of the sort that you may dig up! We want it."¹⁹ The following month Merton dispatched another shipment containing manuscripts and a correspondence file with foreign publishers about his works.²⁰

Other material must have been more difficult for Merton to part with. In November 1958 Merton wrote that he was sending the university some rough drafts of a letter he wrote to the Soviet Writers Union concerning the Pasternak Affair. He noted, "I thought I might as well register a good protest, but as the draft shows I toned it down in the hope of getting it across more effectively."²¹ Five years later, in May 1963, he wrote, "I am sending you some more items, including my most valued letters from Pasternak. Take good care of them! I am sure you will."

Thomas Merton had even stronger links to the university and to Lexington which continued long after Dr. Thompson left the library in 1963. These, of course, were an interest in painting inherited from his artist father Owen Merton and a related admiration for the graphic arts—areas that led naturally to his strong relationship with Carolyn and Victor Hammer. The Merton-Hammer correspondence, which contains approximately 160 letters, notes, and post cards generated between 1955 and 1968, is the most important series within the university's Merton collection and reflects not only the interests which bound these three individuals together, but also provides significant insight into the way they influenced each other's work and thought processes.

To Thomas Merton, Victor Hammer was a source of energy and inspiration, for Hammer was an individual who possessed high artistic and personal ideals, and standards which were rigidly but richly incorporated into his art and printing. Here was an intellectual giant with whom Merton could share and discuss the spiritual merits of religious art. In addition, Merton found Hammer and his wife Carolyn to be willing partners in the production of his work through the medium of the private press. Indeed, Hammer dedicated much of his time during the period from 1958 to 1962 to designing, printing, and publishing such Merton pieces as *What Ought I to Do? Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (1959), *The Solitary Life* (1960), and *Hagia Sophia* (1962).

In addition, Carolyn Hammer, the inspiration behind the University of Kentucky's King Library Press, published Merton's *Prometheus: A Meditation* in 1958.²²

Upon receiving his copy of *Prometheus*, Merton in a letter to Lawrence Thompson wrote: "*Prometheus* seems to me to have turned out, in every way, as a monastic project should. And this would not have been possible were there not something essentially 'monastic' in the attitude and outlook of the library there."²³ To Victor Hammer went even higher praise after Merton received his copy of *The Desert Fathers*. "I am confirmed in all my admiration of it. Certainly it is one of your finest works, and comes just about as close to perfection as one would hope . . . I am happy and proud to have been the occasion for such a work and to have provided material for it . . . I think it is really something of lasting value. That is what a monk should want, and it is not often that the desire is fulfilled."²⁴

The frequent visits for picnics by the Hammers to Gethsemani, Merton's rare trips to Lexington, and the correspondence all served to provide Merton's life with depth and excitement. They collaborated on many other projects and ideas— on altar cards to replace the "vulgar" ones then in use and on a crucifix by Hammer for the novitiate which Merton dearly missed when he had to say mass in another location before "one of those twisted metal Christs they do these days."²⁵ Then, of course, there were the books which Merton continued to request and Carolyn Hammer continued to supply in a continuous stream.

Full of ideas on printing projects suitable for Hammer's press, Merton requested anything that Carolyn Hammer could find on Nicolas of Cusa that might be worth translation.²⁶ Ten days later he wrote, "I have rather cooled toward Nicholas of Cusa because I find him rather wordy and cerebral. However there is much good in him, and there are possibilities to be investigated."²⁷ Of books he remarked further, "As for my wasteland life, well a hermit is one who lives in the wasteland as an outsider but my cultural desolation is not total. There are books."²⁸

The Merton-Hammer correspondence also reflects the evolutionary changes which occurred in Merton's life and affected his writing. In one letter to Victor Hammer, Merton wrote several paragraphs decrying the Cold War and stated that he wondered "if there is going to be much left of the Western World by 1984, to fulfill George Orwell's prophecies?"²⁹ Four months later in disgust

he wrote, ". . . my higher superiors have suddenly decreed that a monk does not know there is danger of war and consequently should not make any observations on the fact. I am hoping nevertheless to get a little book on the subject published, an observation that has already been written, and comes before their hieratic utterance."³⁰

After Victor Hammer's death in 1967 Merton continued to correspond with Carolyn Hammer. His last letter to her, concerning his Asian journey, was strangely prophetic. "Yes, I am naturally expecting a great deal from the trip. But I am not determining in advance what I intend to get out of it. I just hope to let things arrange themselves, and to work with them. It is too big and too sudden a thing to have been planned, or to be totally planned by anyone even now."³¹ The next piece of correspondence in the file is a telegram from Brother Patrick Hart informing Mrs. Hammer of Merton's death. In 1975 Mrs. Hammer presented the Merton-Hammer correspondence to the University of Kentucky.

The Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky contains much more than can be enumerated here in detail. Significant runs of correspondence, however, include those between Merton and German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (1954-1961), Japanese philosopher Daisetz Suzuki (1959), and with Soviet author Boris Pasternak (1958-1960). The collection also contains full manuscripts, galley proofs, notes, or other fragments from forty-two of Merton's major works. Included are manuscripts from *A Balanced Life of Prayer* (1951), *The Living Bread* (1956), *Monastic Peace* (1958), *The New Man* (1961), *No Man is an Island* (1955), *Prometheus: A Meditation*, (1958), *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (1959), and *Silent Life* (1957).

Many of Merton's book reviews, forewords, and prefaces to books and encyclopedias and journal articles are also well represented by primary source material. Included are such manuscripts as "Classic Chinese Thought" (*Jubilee*, January 1961), "Easter: The New Life" (*Worship*, April 1959), "Ethics and War: A Footnote" (*Catholic Worker*, April 1962), "The Monk in Diaspora" (*Commonweal*, 20 March 1964), "The Pasternak Affair in Perspective" (*Thought*, Winter 1959), "Virginity and Humanism in the Latin Fathers," (*Sponsa Regis*, January 1963), and others.

Even more exciting are Merton's poetry worksheets. Of particular note is the collection of manuscript poems that went into the work *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (Norfolk, Connecticut:

New Directions, 1963). Michael Mott describes this collection as both Merton's "richest and his most confusing" compilation of poetry—at once combining many periods and topics affecting Merton's life along with Merton's translations of the poetry of others he admired.³² Most useful are the holographic, typescript, and mimeographed worksheets which give evidence of the constant shaping of the poet. In Merton's case this is true with the poem "Night Flowering Cactus" (pp. 49-50) which is represented by two holograph versions as well as typescript and mimeograph sheets.

The Merton Collection is continually growing. The university has acquired several significant additional items as they have come on the market. Included among those acquisitions is a fine photographic portrait by John Howard Griffin, the author of *Black Like Me*. The library has also added individual letters or runs of Merton Correspondence with such individuals as Walter Lowenfels, Jonathan Greene, Lewis Mumford, and Richard Tobin. Finally, the library has acquired a set of corrected galley proofs of Merton's work of collected poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963). The Thomas Merton Collection has been catalogued, is served by a descriptive inventory, and is open for public use.

NOTES

- ¹Lawrence S. Thompson to Thomas Merton, 9 February 1951.
²TM to LST, 24 February 1951.
³Idem.
⁴Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 265.
⁵LST to TM, 9 July 1951.
⁶TM to LST, 13 July 1951.
⁷LST to TM, 26 February 1951.
⁸TM to LST, 6 March 1951.
⁹LST to TM, 28 March 1951.
¹⁰LST to TM, 13 December 1951.
¹¹TM to LST, 23 September 1952.
¹²Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 269, 272, 275-76.
¹³TM to LST, 18 November 1952.
¹⁴TM to LST, 11 August 1953.
¹⁵TM to LST, 18 November 1952, 22 February 1955, 9 February 1957, and LST to TM, 21 March 1958.
¹⁶TM to LST, 18 November 1952.
¹⁷TM to Carolyn Reading Hammer, 6 August 1957.
¹⁸TM to LST, 26 September 1955.
¹⁹LST to TM, 29 September 1955.
²⁰LST to TM, 27 October 1955.
²¹TM to LST, 6 November 1958.
²²The King Library Press, directed by Merton's friend Carolyn Reading Hammer, published these as *Boris Pasternak/Thomas Merton: Six Letters* in 1973.
²³TM to LST, 4 July 1958.
²⁴TM to Victor Hammer, 12 August 1959.
²⁵TM to VH, 26 November 1955 and 28 August 1965.
²⁶TM to CRH, 28 March 1961.
²⁷TM to VH, 10 April 1961.
²⁸TM to VH, 29 August 1966.
²⁹TM to VH, 28 January 1962.
³⁰TM to VH, 10 May 1962.
³¹TM to CRH, 6 September 1968.
³²Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 384.