

# DEATH OF A “MERTONIAN”: AN APPRECIATION OF W. H. “PING” FERRY

by **Gregory J. Ryan**

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Editor’s Note: Wilbur Hugh “Ping” Ferry died at his home, Fort Hill Farm in Scarsdale, New York, on 30 September 1995. A memorial service was held on 24 October at the Century Club in New York City.

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“The acquiescent society is for slaves  
the critical society is for free people.”  
W. H. Ferry<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Merton was a cloistered monk and, later, a hermit living at the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Trappist-Cistercian monastery in the hills of Kentucky. W. H. Ferry was, at the time of his friendship with Merton, a Vice President and Fellow at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions (CSDI) in Santa Barbara, California. On the one hand, it seems highly unlikely, if not nearly impossible, that the paths of these two men should have crossed. On the other hand, it was inevitable.

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Wilbur Hugh Ferry was born and reared in Detroit at a time when firefighters still drove horse-drawn equipment.<sup>2</sup> His father, a Catholic, worked for the Packard Motor Car Company and his mother, an Episcopalian, was a teacher. As a boy, “Ping” (as he came to be known) loved books after he dipped into *The Book of Knowledge* during a bout with diphtheria. He was frequently taunted in the Epiphany Episcopal Church courtyard by older and bigger boys who wouldn’t let him play football with them: “You’re too little to even play “ping-pong.” Saturday mornings were spent at the library where he carried an armload of books home to last him for the week. He studied the piano and the saxophone. A budding writer, he sent daily letters home to his mother from camp each summer. At one point, he thought he might like to be an Episcopal minister when he grew up.

After two years of honors classes at Edison Intermediate School, Ping transferred into a rigorous program at the University of Detroit, a Jesuit high school. After high school he went off to Dartmouth College where the academic competition among students was even keener. Though popular and well-liked by his peers, he became unhappy enough with college life to run away, only to be found in New York City by the NYPD who returned him to New Hampshire — PDQ!

Ping steered clear of fraternities at Dartmouth, though many



W. H. “PING” FERRY  
ITMS Third General Meeting  
Colorado Springs, 1993

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considered him odd because of it. “Everyone” was expected to join a fraternity. Ping just wasn’t interested. He became active in other campus activities: the football team and literary clubs. He eventually succeeded Nelson Rockefeller as President of the Arts Club. After graduation, Ping spent his summer vacation in Europe. In the fall he was employed by the Choate School as assistant football coach and teacher of English, Latin, and Scripture. He was housemaster for future President John F. Kennedy and his older brother, Joseph Kennedy. When Ping was brought on the carpet and fired for misconduct — mostly drunkenness — the Kennedy brothers tried to intercede on his behalf: “Daddy can fix it. Daddy can do anything.” Make a President, yes. Save Ping’s job, who knows? The matter was probably never brought to the elder Joseph Kennedy’s attention.

From age twenty five to thirty seven, Ping held a variety of jobs: steel worker, reporter for *The Detroit Free Press*, seaman third class on a ship bound for Buenos Aires, casino dealer, sports writer for *The Detroit Times*, and organizer for the American Newspaper Guild. Most notable, however, were Ping’s positions in public relations. For eight months he was director of publicity for Eastern Airlines. In 1944 he became P. R. Director for the brand-new CIO-PAC (Political Action Committee) where he formed a life-long friendship with artist Ben Shahn. Soon Ping became a speech writer for Henry Ford II and the Ford Foundation. His reputation as a persuasive writer and “savvy” negotiator spread quickly.

Ping eventually left Ford and, along with Robert Hutchens, co-founded the Fund for the Republic. As the Fund’s outspoken Executive Vice President during the McCarthy era, he soon began ruffling feathers: the American Legion, Congressional committees, newspaper columnist Walter Winchell, the AFL, and other groups. One agitated patriot complained to Ping’s father: “If I had a son like yours, I’d shoot him!” This was high praise, indeed.

In 1959 the Fund put on a different suit of clothes, appearing as the newly-organized Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions (CSDI), located in Santa Barbara, California. Ping’s excitement and happiness over this venture were dulled by the deaths of his brother “Pong” and of his father, who by that time had moved up through the ranks to become the President and Chairman of the Packard Motor Company. The Center became a forum for intellectuals engaged in stimulating discussions and planning for the development of sane corporate and public policy. Ping served as a Fellow and Vice President at the Center from 1959 till 1969 when he was unceremoniously relieved of his duties. (An equitable court settlement later vindicated him.) It was his time at the Center which indirectly brought about his contact with Thomas Merton.

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Ferry had known James Laughlin, Merton’s New Directions publisher, since 1951 when Laughlin had approached Ferry at the Ford Foundation for a grant for his fledgling literary magazine, *Perspectives*. As Ferry remembers it, Merton later became familiar with the published papers that the CSDI had been spreading around, liked what he saw, and asked Laughlin how he thought he could “get in on the action.” Laughlin suggested that Merton write to Ferry in Santa Barbara. “I want first of all to say that I am very interested in the work of the Center and would like to participate in it in any way that I can . . . I assure you of my deep interest in the work you are doing out there and my very best wishes for its fruitfulness and success.”<sup>13</sup>

The Ferry-Merton correspondence reveals a bond of friendship that developed right from the start, though characteristically, it took some time for Ferry to feel familiar enough with Merton to evolve from addressing him as “Dear Father Merton,” then “Dear Father Tom,” and finally “Dear Tom.” Merton’s first letter closed with “Very cordially yours, Thomas Merton,” but before long it was “Cordially in Christ, Tom.” It was a rich and stimulating correspondence that lasted from 1961 till Merton’s death in 1968. (In 1969 Ferry donated his 118 letters and cards to the Thomas Merton Center. In 1984 he collected and edited a selection in limited edition, *Letters from Tom*.)

Early on, Merton explained to Ferry that his [Merton’s] being a cloistered monk did not exempt him from being concerned about the important human issues of the day: race, war, nuclear weapons, mass media, technology, peace, and ecology. “This simply means that a contemplative monk should have a quiet though articulate place in the discussions of his time, when the time is one like ours. I’m sure you agree” (*LFT*, p. 12).

They did agree. Merton then suggested a visit to Gethsemani by Ferry or Hutchens, the Director of the CSDI, or any other interested party from the Center.

At this time, Merton was busy collecting essays for his proposed book, *Breakthrough to Peace* which he was editing. Ferry suggested some people he thought would be good to include: James Newman, Lewis Mumford, Walter Stein, and Gordon Zahn. When the book was published, Ferry sent it around to various editors for review. "Here's a first class book to review. It is the best collection of essays I have seen on the peace issue . . ." (Letter to Book Editor, *Oceanside Blade-Tribune*, 12 September 1962). Later, Merton wrote: "I was glad the LA Times gave such space to the Breakthrough piece. As you say, I am happy the book gets around at all" (*LFT*, p. 32).

Merton made it his practice to send Ferry manila envelopes filled with mimeographed essays, poems, articles, and letters. "The articles I have sent you are in any case being censored for eventual printing, but meanwhile they can be of interest to a circle of thinking people and may arouse worthwhile comment" (*LFT*, p. 15). Ferry appreciated all these items, saying that they "make the soul more spacious" (Postcard, 22 February 1962). "Please put this check in the account that pays for mimeographing and printing of your materials. I greatly value and make use of everything you send me" (Letter, 17 May 1962).

Ferry helped Merton keep current with world events. He entered subscriptions in Merton's name to *I. F. Stone's Weekly* and kept him supplied with the *War/Peace Report*, the *Southern Democrat*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and other journals. He also sent Merton books that he needed for his work: James Joyce, David Jones, Edwin Muir, Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Ellul, and others. "Anyway, I am happy with the discovery [of David Jones' *Agenda*] and want to go into it much more. Also — could I ask you for this? — can you dig up for me the paperback of *Finnegan's Wake* and I'll swap you a drawing for it. I need it bad with Jones here" (*LFT*, p. 61).

Ferry visited Merton at Gethsemani in the spring of 1962 and was asked by the abbot, Dom James Fox, to address the community. When he got back to Santa Barbara, Ferry wrote to Merton and offered his "deepest thanks to you and Father Abbot for one of the finest experiences of my life" (Letter, 26 April 1962). In a letter dated 8 May 1962, Merton concluded: "Best wishes always, we all remember you visit with joy" (*LFT*, p. 29). Ferry framed the check he received from Dom James for his presentation and hung it in his office.

Ferry appreciated Merton's increasingly solitary life and was protective of it. He assured Merton that he did not want him to feel obliged to answer his letters; Merton had enough letters to write. Ferry even tried to cheer a disconsolate correspondent by telling her that Merton was "always 924 letters behind" (Letter, 30 October 1962). He told Merton that after reading *Guide to Cistercian Life* he did not think it would be proper for him to visit for at least another six months. "I wish I had urgent business to conduct with you to give me a genuine excuse to bust into your heavy schedule" (Letter, 20 September 1963).

In the summer of 1965 when Merton was moving into his hermitage on a full-time basis, he wrote Ferry that he would be cutting back on visitors, but that he would still be welcome. He told Ferry: "Your mail will also get through. I am not sure what will finally happen about mail in general but I will see to it that the important contacts are not broken . . ." (*LFT*, p. 47). On the one hand Ferry valued Merton's solitude, but on the other hand, he appreciated the value of Merton's social criticism and sometimes wished that Merton could be on the scene as a visiting Fellow at the Center in Santa Barbara.

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One of the most turbulent times in Merton's monastic life was in 1966 when he developed a relationship with a nurse while he was in the hospital in Louisville for a back operation. Soon afterward, Merton phoned Ferry and asked him to come to Gethsemani as soon as possible — ASAP! It was urgent. When Ping finally heard Merton's story and realized the anguish the situation was causing, he told Merton that he did not think it could possibly work out. Ferry was so concerned about his friend's well-being that two weeks later he wrote to James Fox suggesting that Merton get away from the monastery and stay with him in Santa Barbara for quite awhile. "It would appear to me greatly beneficial both to the Order and to Father Louis if he were sent

off on a two to three month vacation. A change of surroundings appears to me, as it may to you, to offer the best and surest way through the current thicket” (Letter, 11 July 1966). He assured Dom James that Merton would have complete privacy in his own suite of rooms in Ferry’s home where he would be able to follow his monastic observances. There would be no publicity attached to the visit. Dom James wrote a cordial letter thanking Ferry for his concern, but declined the offer. He said the situation in Louisville was a dead issue and Father Louis was regaining his balance by entering more deeply into his life as a hermit. For Merton’s part, his letter to Ping dated 28 June 1966 (before Ping’s letter to Dom James) stated: “Thanks for your very good visit yesterday — most enjoyable and helpful . . .”<sup>4</sup> His letter of 15 July 1966 stated: “It was really great to have you here and I certainly enjoyed it. A fine day. Come again anytime” (*HGL*, p. 226).

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Ferry helped arrange some important visitors for Merton. He set up Joan Baez’s visit in 1966, for instance. At that time she was busy organizing the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence, and she and fellow pilgrim Ira Sandperl and Merton had fruitful conversations at the monastery. “I believe we talked about Gandhi, nonviolence, the war in Vietnam, but what I remember clearly was discussing the question of his discipline.” She had the impression that Merton wanted to travel, but the abbot would not let him. “I had the strong feeling that [the Abbot’s position] was in the best interest of the Catholic Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Merton was planning a study of the music of Bob Dylan and asked Ferry to arrange for Dylan to visit the monastery, but Ferry said he couldn’t make that one happen — too many managers and handlers to deal with. “I am barraging Bob Dylan with Nostradamus, via Feiffer & others, but haven’t heard yet whether any have got through the Inscrutability Barrier” (Letter, 19 July 1966). Merton’s study of Dylan never materialized.

In early December 1966, Ferry told Merton that he and another of Merton’s friends, Dan Berrigan, were trying to get Jackie Kennedy to go to Hanoi for Christmas as a witness for peace. “Am working on a plan to get Mrs. Kennedy to Saigon for Christmas, there to remain ‘as long as the cessation in hostilities goes on.’ About one chance in 313, but why not try?” (Letter, 2 December 1966). Ferry’s letter to Kennedy also mentioned that Pope Paul VI was rumored to be going to Vietnam for Christmas and that it would be fitting if they both stayed. “I hope you will think prayerfully about this proposal, and decide to act on it” (Letter, 8 December 1966). Though nothing ever came of the plan, it shows Ferry’s commitment to try every avenue to bring about an end to the horrible suffering in Vietnam.

The two friends each suffered from bursitis — Merton’s interfered with his typing and firewood chopping — and they compared notes on possible treatments, medications, and operations. “I am going in for cortisone shot day after tomorrow. That usually helps” (*LFT*, p. 53). “Does not look as if the bursitis op. worked out. It is still much bother and X ray shows some calcium deposits still there” (*LFT*, p. 58). Ferry had had his shoulders operated on in 1951 and was used to shots and medications. “Wow, what pain! I suffer with you, dear boy, for my right shoulder is beginning to speak up again too. But now that I know the Shoulder Trick I fear not” (Ferry Letter, 17 February 1967).

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At times Merton became so vexed by America’s foreign policies that he wanted to get up and go to some other country. He was not alone in this. After complaining about Johnson’s shelling and mining of rivers in Vietnam while calling the bombing raids “steps for peace,” Ferry wrote: “Where is there a country I can move to? I am ashamed of being an American. Maybe I’ll one day have the courage to move away. But where?” (Letter, 18 February 1967). Two weeks later, Merton responded: “I can understand how you feel about wanting to get out and be in some other country that can never own the bomb, never afford genocide, and lacks the joys of American know how in alienating the rest of the universe . . . I periodically yearn to become a citizen of Ecuador or Costa Rica so that I know how you feel” (*LFT*, pp. 57-58). In a similar letter in September, Merton wrote: “Doesn’t matter that much, really. Wherever one is one is only an ambassador of affluence and

napalm” (*LFT*, p. 62). In November Ferry wrote: “For the first time I am beginning to believe that US politics has passed the point of no return. I used to have vivid notions about how it would be redeemed by one or two good examples. But not now. Its frailties have become its strengths.” Three months later he wrote: “The wide, wide feeling of despair & helplessness is threatening. Can anyone do anything about it? How much of it results from Vietnam Poisoning, how much from affluence? Which starts are off? Are we in VN because we are [at the] end of [our] spiritual rope or vice versa?” (Letter, 28 February 1968).

In the same letter, Ferry commented that his article “Farewell to Integration” was not being well received — even by white liberals. It is “getting me into a zillion argybargies here & there. Gosh the liberals will not listen to anything except their threadbare protestations! They think your “Letter to a White Liberal” is made somehow null & void because written in the Kentucky hills, & my arguments ditto because [they are] written in this lay monastery.”

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While Merton had a great deal of trouble getting his peace articles past the censors of the Cistercian Order, he often alluded, not without a certain amount of irony, to Pope John XXIII’s encyclical “Pacem in Terris”: “Luckily, the Pope did not have to please the Trappist censors!” Very early in their correspondence, Merton wrote: “I am having a bit of censor trouble. This makes me think that one way of getting some of my stuff around would be to let you people mimeograph it and circulate it with your material. Would you consider this in some cases?” (*HGL*, p. 203). After convincing Ferry that this would not be illicit as far as the Order was concerned, Merton’s “Circular Letters” to his friends, his articles against war, and his topical but unpublished “Cold War Letters” were soon being sent around the country bearing a Santa Barbara postmark. This arrangement worked out so well that by early 1963, Ferry wrote to Merton that he was “one of [his] chief bootleggers on this coast” and was happy to be able to keep the supply channels flowing (Letter, 31 January 1963). Ferry was the self-proclaimed corresponding secretary “sending [his] stuff to the Merton Club of south California” (*HGL*, p. 213). When the pipeline threatened to get out of hand, Ferry felt he had to put a stop to it. After all, it was not official CSDI business.

Part of Merton’s censorship problem came from the fact that the censors of the Order and his higher superiors felt that his writings on war did not present the proper public image of a monk — especially a contemplative monk! Ferry responded that this was a good sign. “The problem . . . is not that the image is bad, it is that the image is good; what censor wants a good image in a nation revering bad ones?” (Letter, 14 June 1962). Merton must have enjoyed this irony.

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In 1965, under Ferry’s management, the CSDI sponsored a “Pacem in Terris Conference” in New York to discuss the ramifications of John XXIII’s encyclical. In April 1967, Ferry organized the second “Pacem in Terris Conference” (PIT) which was held in Geneva, Switzerland. “Of course you will be — would be — most welcome at Geneva, & could doubtless do many chores for peace there. But I did not send an invitation because both you and the Abbot [who signed his letters to Ferry “Pong”] seemed to make it pretty clear that there was no chance of such a hegira at this time.” He went on to say that if it should become possible, however, all of Merton’s expenses would be paid. “I have an idea that history is to be made at Geneva. It would be nice to have your hand among those of the makers” (Letter, 13 April 1967).

If Merton could not get off “campus” to attend important conferences such as this, he could at least host an occasional one at Gethsemani. He suggested to Ferry and a few other peace activists from the Fellowship of Reconciliation that they come to the monastery for a retreat focusing on the topic “The Roots of Protest.” “I especially want you to meet Fr. Dan Berrigan, a very live young Jesuit with great potentialities” (*LFT*, p. 41). Ferry wrote: “I would love to take part in the FOR thing at Gethsemani, though I am not worthy” (Letter, 15 October 1964). Not only was he worthy, but Merton noted in his journal: “The FOR retreat has been



remarkable lively and fruitful. Sessions in the gate house mostly, because of rain, but we got to the hermitage yesterday afternoon. Ferry has been very helpful. He and I talked a lot at first about Ellul.”<sup>6</sup> In a Merton Oral History interview Ferry recalled that Merton had asked him to deliver the homily at the retreatant’s Mass, only to have Merton change his mind at the last minute for fear of the Abbot’s disapproval. “The reason for that, that the Abbot wouldn’t have liked it I guess, is because I’m not Catholic. And as cordial as my relations with ‘Pong’ were, this would not justify my appearance at a Mass and my giving the homily. Tom never explained it. I just accepted it.”<sup>7</sup>

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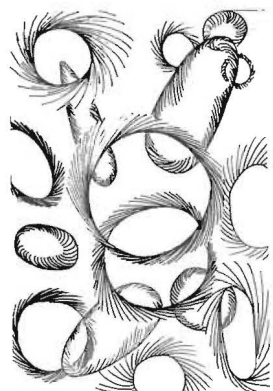
In 1968 Ferry wrote to Merton that he had done some traveling along the coast and then “in rangeland of interior, migosh what a state! We must look at it together some time. Say when” (Letter, 3 June 1968). In July he sent Merton a postcard from Ghost Ranch, Abiquiu, New Mexico saying that he had “Spent the day yesterday with [Father] Aelred and his group [at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert] . . . fine welcoming group” (Postcard, 8 July 1968). With a new abbot at Gethsemani [Flavian Burns], travel restrictions were loosened. Soon, Ferry became a kind of travel agent for Merton, helping him plan excursions to the West Coast in search of a possible site for a more secluded hermitage since Gethsemani was becoming too accessible to friends and curiosity seekers. “Well, I really do take seriously the idea of exploring the Pacific Coast with you. There is no question that I really need a top secret hideout where nobody will know I am there and where I can be alone with a lot of wind and sea for long periods — and perhaps indefinitely” (*LFT*, p. 65).

In early October 1968 Ferry and his wife spent eight days driving Merton up the California coast before his departure for Asia where he was to meet with monks and nuns from various religious traditions. On October 4, without any publicity, Merton addressed a gathering at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions sharing with them his “hopes and aspirations” for the trip, and telling them that, in a year or so, he would stop back when he returned to the States to debrief them on his experiences. “It may turn out that it was all nonsense, and it may turn out that it was all romance — all a dream and so forth. Or it may turn out that I have something very interesting to say. Or I may just avoid the whole issue and not say anything to anybody about anything.”<sup>8</sup> Merton’s unexpected death in Bangkok, Thailand prevented this reunion.

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Merton was a monk with a “quiet though articulate place” from which to observe world events. Ferry was a social critic whose forum was his “lay monastery,” first in Santa Barbara and then in Scarsdale. If he was a lay-monk, he did not wear his religious convictions on his sleeve. While it was true that Ferry’s initial contact with Merton was on the topic of technology, their interests in literature, music, politics, and art were outward indications of a deeper communion. By tacit agreement they did not talk about spiritual matters, but after seeing some of Ferry’s artwork, Merton hinted at his friend’s interior life: “Thanks for your . . . geometric swirls. You are a hidden Santa Barbara Mondrian . . . I like the ones that lead you into a funnel. There’s where you have been putting your secret spirituality, you old Christian” (*HGL*, p. 219). Ferry once remarked: “One of the most serious needs of the higher education of the future — education of [people] who will spend much of their time in committee sessions — will be to develop courses in creative doodling.”

After the death of his friend, Ferry reminisced: “[Merton] was a strong, wise, passionate human being, warm to the touch, glittering to the mind. I was indeed lucky to have known him.” (Letter to G. Ryan, 22 April 1977). “[F]or me Tom appears to have been a broker of the conscience, an ever-fresh source of insight into the issues that tear one’s insides.”<sup>9</sup> “His death left a hole in the lives of many people — never to be filled.



FERRY SWIRLS

There have been a few great men in my life — three or four, maybe — and he was one of the.”<sup>10</sup> Unable to attend Merton’s funeral Mass at Gethsemani, Ferry wrote to Brother Patrick Hart: “My heart will be with you all.”

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Ferry continued to be an active social critic. Twenty-five paces from the doorstep of his home in Scarsdale which he shares with his wife, Carol, was his office/hermitage, affectionately known as “The Barn.” No high-tech word processors there. His vintage Royal typewriter, sitting near what was his father’s desk, was kept busy with dozens of letters sent around the world each week. There were no computerized data bases either. Boxes of user-friendly card-stock file folders strewn on the large desk top waited for his attention. His later projects included peaceful resolution of the situation in Bosnia, race relations, the economy, Dartmouth’s purchase of a vast computer network as part of its library, the environment, the removal of J. Edgar Hoover’s name from the FBI Building, and designing a framework for a peaceful world community.

In Christian-Zen-like fashion, Ping Ferry continued to be a friend of Thomas Merton. In the Introduction to *Letters from Tom* he said: “I wanted to share some of the joy of a friendship that is as alive and as precious as it was fifteen years ago” (*LFT*, p. 7). He also pointed out that he and Merton had written their letters for friendship, not for publication, but said: “I am happy that [they have] become a part of the multicolored quilt that warms the Merton fellowship.”

“Mertoniacs,” as Ferry (without exempting himself) called the legions of people who continue to read Merton’s books and attend international meetings and conferences, frequently found Ferry among their ranks — unobtrusive, observant, down-to-earth, and completely supportive. Like his friend Merton, he did not always take the proceedings too seriously. When things got a little thick and heavy at one Merton meeting, he was heard to say: “I need a drink!”

The Irish have a saying: “Two shorten the road.” Ping Ferry and Thomas Merton traveled a seemingly short road together in life. Both have now reached their destination. In conclusion, and on behalf of countless Mertoniacs, I offer a toast to Ping Ferry: “May God hold you in the palm of His hand — and not squeeze!”

#### NOTES

1. Victor S. Navasky, “The Happy Heretic,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (July 1966), pp. 53-57.
2. Biographical information is based on Ferry’s autobiographical notes, “Progress Notes, 17 December 1985.”
3. Thomas Merton, *Letters from Tom*; selected and edited by W. H. Ferry (Scarsdale, New York: Fort Hill Press, 1984), p. 13. Hereafter in the text as *LFT*.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*; edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 226. Hereafter in the text as *HGL*.
5. Joan Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With* (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 131.
6. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 1964-1965*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), p. 100.
7. Wilbur Hugh Ferry, “Action at the Center: An Interview with Gregory J. Ryan (assisted by Elizabeth H. Ryan),” *The Merton Annual* 4 (New York: AMS Press, 1992), pp. 205-219.
8. Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*; edited by Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 40.
9. Wilbur Hugh Ferry, “The Difference He Made,” *Continuum* 7 (1969, no. 2, p. 320).
10. Merton, *By Those Who Knew Him Best*; edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 93.