

THE MEANING OF THE SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN

by **Elena Malits**, C.S.C.

Robert Giroux gave his friend at Gethsemani astute editorial advice when he rejected the original beginning of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as too abstract and preachy. "I pointed out to Tom that he was writing an autobiography, and readers would want to know at the start who he was, where he came from, and how he got where he was."¹ That was precisely what people wanted at the opening — and, indeed, throughout the book.

What readers sought in 1948 in this autobiography is what they still seek today: to know this fascinating human being, Thomas Merton, and to follow him in his quest for God and self-identity. If the book has become a "spiritual classic," I think it is because *The Seven Storey Mountain* succeeds with considerable power in disclosing a quintessentially religious person in all his individuality and common humanity. Reviewing Merton's *Thirty Poems* in 1944, Robert Lowell had remarked that "the poet would appear to be more phenomenal than the poetry."² We might say the same of this autobiographer and his autobiography.

In spite of Robert Giroux's skillful editing, *The Seven Storey Mountain* remains flawed as a literary work. It is wordy, even verbose. The narrative line is too often interrupted by overly harsh self-criticism, dull sermonizing, and romantic idealizing about the Catholic Church and monasticism. The monk's prose runs away with him as recklessly as had the undergraduate's all night conversations in the bars on Morningside Heights. But if the autobiography betrays structural and stylistic imperfections, they are not fatal ones. Ironically, I think they contribute to the vitality of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

The very flaws of this book enhance it as a mirror of its author's struggling to articulate a sense of his real self and the meaning of his life. It reflects a relatively young man who had searched and struggled in the past and who continues to do so in the present, though the problems may be quite different. If Merton began writing his autobiography in 1944, he was only six years removed from his conversion to Catholicism and was scarcely experienced in the monastic life, having entered Gethsemani in 1941. To be sure, he had been writing as long as he could remember, but his youthful efforts seem more notable than his accomplishments. By the time he finished *The Seven Storey Mountain* in the late 1940s, Thomas Merton had mastered

1. Robert Giroux, "Editing *The Seven Storey Mountain*," *America* 159 (22 October 1988): no. 11, p. 274.

2. Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," *Commonweal* 42 (22 June 1945): no. 10, pp. 230-242.

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neither the demands of his contemplative vocation, his craft as a writer, nor the relationship between the two.

The autobiography this man in his early thirties produced expressed an unfinished human being and an unfinished life. Indeed, it is the story of someone who had undergone radical transformation — from unbelief to faith, from lack of direction to vocational commitment, from self-seeking to self-surrender. But *The Seven Storey Mountain* is not just the narrative of Merton's past. It is preeminently a testimony to a life in process. The autobiographer is — and knows he is — still searching, still struggling, still undergoing purgation. That is exactly what the metaphorical title of the book was meant to convey: Thomas Merton continues to be *in via*. The road to faith has been traversed, but the journey in faith goes on. The seeker is still seeking. He had found his vocation, but certainly not realized its possibilities. We should not take lightly the classic line with which the writer ended his autobiography: "*Sit finis libri, non finis quarendi.*"³ These words epitomize the power of Thomas Merton as a person and a writer.

The Seven Storey Mountain has often been criticized (by myself along with others) for its triumphalism. Merton appears convinced — too convinced — that he has found the answers. Yes and no. The more he knows about himself and his life, the more mystery he encounters. Paradox. Everywhere paradox. The very act of his writing his life story forced Merton to wrestle with the incomprehensible truth of the intersection of his own freedom and divine providence. Remembering his past plunged him into the unknown of himself and the unknown of God — and into the unknown of the potentialities of the present. Working on an autobiography for a man like Thomas Merton was an activity of wonder in the presence of infinite mystery. It was an act of worship. The story wells up from sources far deeper than a gifted writer's verbal artistry.

I would not hesitate to say that *The Seven Storey Mountain* springs from those unconscious depths that make for genuine creativity, if not for perfect craftsmanship. Merton said of the process of writing the autobiography: "I don't know what audience I might have been thinking of . . . I suppose I just put down what was in me, under the eyes of God who knows what is in me."⁴ Is this pure spontaneity? More than that, I think. Merton is describing the sort of outpouring that comes from disciplined spontaneity. He is talking about a process of letting go when one has finally gained some control.



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I think that writing his life story was for Merton analogous to his efforts at contemplation. He worked, and worked hard, at both prayer and writing. Like any learner, he had to master certain forms. But he instinctively knew that the secret of growing lies in knowing when and how to let go. In being asked to write an autobiography, Merton would take the risk of stepping beyond the familiar. He would allow something new and unknown to be born. He would let go the distrust of himself that his religious conversion had seared into his soul. If

3. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978): p. 423. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SSM*.

4. Quoted by Giroux in "Editing *The Seven Storey Mountain*."

he produced the book by just putting down what was in him, that sustained action expressed a reconquered confidence in his psyche. He could let go the fear that writing might be an escape from his calling, rather than an expression of it. He would let come what came to him to write “under the eyes of God who knows what is in me.”

At this stage of things, Thomas Merton was not fully master of his prose. But it had life. On occasion it sparkled. His lack of complete control was a *felix culpa*. Had he constructed the narrative too carefully, too deliberately, it might be as dead as monks who keep the external rules perfectly, but miss the point. If he indulged in sheer verbal effusion, the story would be incoherent. As it turned out, *The Seven Storey Mountain* embodied the man at a critical moment in his life. Writing the autobiography forced Merton to live through the paradox faced by anyone who seeks God: to know how to act and how to undergo; how to construct and yet accept the givens. The man who wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain* was on the way, but not yet there. He was out of the inferno, but not in paradise. He was ascending the mountain. And that is where most of us would-be religious people are. That is what makes Thomas Merton’s youthful autobiography so archetypal.

It tells the unique story of Thomas Merton, while it shows something of each of us to herself or himself. It articulates the desires, discouragement, and confusions all of us know. This book is in some uncanny way our story, no matter how different the circumstances of our lives compared with those of Thomas Merton’s. His autobiography is the story of a human being — of the human being — on a quest for the infinite. It reveals to us both our possibilities and our limitations. It humbles and exalts us. *The Seven Storey Mountain* confronts us with ourselves as we are and the selves God would have us become. It is a book about becomings. It is a book about the mystery of the human self being elicited by grace.

Whether Merton realized how profoundly he had tapped into the psyche of all of us in writing his own story, I don’t know. By the mid-1960s, however, he certainly did. In the Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he said to his new audience:

Therefore, most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, nor as a friend only. I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to the One who lives and speaks in both.⁵

“I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self.” That is the key, I believe to the appeal of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton addresses each of us in communicating his own vulnerability. He manages to cut through what separates us in the unrepeatability of our individual experiences, and unites us in the wounded humanity we share in common. He expresses longings we don’t know how to express. He shows us how to forgive failures we can’t forgive in ourselves. Merton’s autobiography sets us — like him — squarely in the sight of God who knows and accepts how fragile we are and whose transforming power will heal us.

Over the years I’ve asked people, young and old, what turns them on about *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The consistent answer is: “I can identify with this man.” That certainly was my response when I first read the book in high school, as it is that of my post-Vatican II college students. Undoubtedly, most of you who have read it have felt that. The autobiography intrigues and inspires many whose lives are concretely very different than that of Thomas Merton.

5. Thomas Merton, “Honorable Reader”: *Reflections on My Work*; ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989): p. 67.

He was talented beyond our wildest dreams. Merton's pre-Gethsemani life was exotic compared with most of ours. He was adventuresome, uninhibited, daring. He was honest, reflective, open. He was fun. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Thomas Merton comes through in the human measure. For all his personal gifts and unusual experience, he shows that he is not unlike you and me: ambivalent, uncertain, frustrated, inconsistent. A sinner. A redeemed sinner. In the autobiography Merton was living out the seeker in each of us. He was on the way, on the way. And any of us who have flirted with or totally surrendered ourselves to the religious quest can identify with that. His story reveals a person on the move, a person being moved by God.

And Merton's narrative moves us. Its immediacy and passion prod us to reflect on the action of God within the structure of our personality and in the circumstances of our life. Thomas Merton acknowledged the design of God in his very temperament with its conflicting attractions: "I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the mess the world is in, and some of her versatility" (*SSM*, pp. 3-4). He possessed a contemplative and an active side. These dispositions would be in tension in the autobiography and throughout Merton's life. But it was a creative tension that kept the man searching and growing. God had given him these genes. They were part of his destiny. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is Thomas Merton's account of his trying to work out that destiny. Near the end of his life the monk could sum it up in one short phrase: "My task is only to be what I am"⁶

If God was at work in Merton's genetic tendencies, the autobiographer also recognized the divine scheme in his cultural formation. By the time he was a teenager, Tom Merton had lived in France, America, Bermuda, and England. He had tasted the best and the worst in each society. All that travelling around, all that need to accommodate himself to new situations would leave an indelible mark on the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The autobiography fits, after all, the genre of a journey story. Its penultimate paragraph imagines God speaking to the man who has been brought "from Prades to Bermuda to St. Antonin to Oakham to London to Cambridge to Rome to New York to Columbia to Corpus Christi to St. Bonaventure to the Cistercian Abbey of the poor men who labor in Gethsemani" (*SSM*, pp. 422-423).

Merton's experience of living in many worlds cultivated in him an openness and receptiveness to cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. He learned languages easily, enjoyed talking with all sorts of people, and relished differences. At the writing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he was still too close to his own conversion to Roman Catholicism to appreciate religious diversity — but that would come in time. And, again, it would be Thomas Merton's concrete experience of "having been around" that would lead him to it.

But already in the autobiography, we meet a person who believes that God's hand has been shaping him to reverence the uniqueness of individuals and particular peoples. He delights in the simplicity of French peasants. He is profoundly impressed by Brahmachari, the Hindu monk in New York. The author of *The Seven Storey Mountain* was in many respects far removed from the writer of *Mystics and Zen Masters* which appeared nearly twenty years later. But the contours of the young Merton's life had shaped him for the insights of the middle-aged man who wrote: "Our task now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful

6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1973): p. 231.

pilgrimage.”⁷ Merton’s narrative in *The Seven Storey Mountain* moves us, I think for another reason. It articulates poignantly the significance of the ordinary in his processes of religious conversion and commitment. Here is his classic formulation of what I like to call “autobiography as theology.” It comes just about in the middle of the book and is a pivotal statement:

So now is the time to tell a thing that I could not realize then, but which has become very clear to me; that God brought me and a half a dozen others together at Columbia, and made us friends, in such a way that our friendship would work powerfully to rescue us from the confusion and misery in which we had come to find ourselves . . .

All our salvation begins on the level of common and natural and ordinary things. (That is why the whole economy of the Sacraments, for instance, rests, in its material element, upon plain and ordinary things like bread and wine and water and salt and oil.) And so it was with me. Books and ideas and poems and stories, pictures and music, buildings, cities, places, philosophies were to be the materials on which grace would work. (*SSM*, p. 178)

The meaning of *The Seven Storey Mountain* for many people is that it points toward the right “places” to look for God. Not in visions and extraordinary phenomena. Not, as Merton said was his mistake on his pilgrimage to Cuba, in looking for Our Lady to appear, “beautiful, in any of the ceiba trees” (*SSM*, p. 281). Merton’s autobiography forces us to seek the creative presence of God in the stuff of our everyday life. In my genes, my culture’s glories and limitations, in daily circumstances. The God of Christians — Merton’s God — is revealed in human life. In that particular human life which was the autobiographer’s and in this one which is mine. In incarnation.

That is the message of *The Seven Storey Mountain* written at the beginning of Merton’s literary productivity, and of the scribbled notebooks which became *The Asian Journal* written at the end of his life. Thomas Merton wrote of his culminating religious experience in the Buddhist gardens at Polonnaruwa. It was early December 1968, just a few days before he died. “The rock, all matter, all life is charged with *dharmakaya* . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.”⁸

Everything that Thomas Merton was and would become was in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, if in embryonic form. His autobiography contained the seeds of contemplation that were to bear fruit for two more decades of Merton’s life and that have borne fruit into our present.

7. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta Books, 1968): p. 112.

8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973): p. 235.