

# MERTON'S SEARCH FOR PARADISE AND HIS INTEGRATION OF RUTH MERTON, SOPHIA AND MARY

by **Sheila M. Hempstead-Milton**

I believe that Merton's longing and search for paradise began as an attempt to regain a sense of union that was lost when his mother, Ruth Jenkins Merton, died. I do not want to suggest that this aspect of Merton's life can be held solely accountable for who he was. Merton, his genius notwithstanding, cannot be reduced to any one explanation, nor can anyone for that matter. What I hope to do is to tilt the mirror a little in the way we view Ruth to enlarge further our view of Merton. I will first show Ruth's relationship to her son as a reason for his search for paradise.

It is possible that Merton's father, Owen, also became part of that search for paradise before and after Owen died ten years after Ruth, but that is not the present focus.<sup>1</sup> There is ample evidence of Ruth's effective and positive mothering, particularly during Merton's first three and three-quarters years. This may have been overlooked because of the negative representation of Ruth in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In the opening pages, Merton, the adult, observes, "How long she had been ill and suffering, still keeping house for us, not without poverty and hardship, without our knowing anything of what it was, I cannot say. *But her sickness probably accounts for my memory of her as thin and pale and rather severe*"<sup>2</sup>. Ruth is revealed in her own writings as an admiring and capable mother, and her meticulous and loving record of Merton's early development illustrates a strong sense of maternal pride and wonderment in her child, together with a desire to provide him with the very best upbringing. At the very least, Ruth was certainly a "good enough" mother, to use Donald Winnicott's term.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, Ruth shows concern, love, and a generosity of heart and spirit in writing "Tom's Book" (1916) which was to be a gift for his grandmother in New Zealand, Gertrude Grierson Merton. Interestingly, in *The Human Journey*, Anthony T. Padovano points out that, while "Owen was a wanderer who did not require constant contact with a family, even his own, for survival, Ruth was rooted in relatives and sought ties with people."<sup>4</sup> Ruth's rootedness and relatedness to her family is revealed in her letters to her future mother-in-law, Gertrude Merton. In one such letter, Ruth writes from Rome, 21 April 1913:

About my family I am willing to write you a great deal, because it is one of the nicest families you would ever know if you can overlook the fact that it is as American as can be, with American faults as well as American fine things.

Both mother and father as well as their parents

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were native Americans and farther back than that I do not know but I think it is mostly English and German blood and the family names are Martin, Baldwin, Calvert, Adams etc.

But we have no pretensions to being anything but plain people and my father was very poor when a boy and got his education and started into a business career by his own efforts — he is a book publisher.

You would surely like him — everyone does, and he is one of the very best and kindest fathers and husbands you could find. People have always said of him that, though he is a very capable business man he has too great a sense of justice and honesty ever to get rich and I must confess that I think that is a great compliment in America when people have not the reputation of being very scrupulous in money matters.

And Mother has spent her whole life for Father and my brother and me, and she is one of those happy, generous people who make friends everywhere and so we always have the house full of guests and there is never the least bit of formality or ceremony sometimes as many as three or four people “drop in” at a meal, often someone comes to stay the night and there is always room and Mother is always pleased to have them.

When I go home I shall try to get some snapshots of them all so you may judge a little for yourself, because my opinion is very likely a partial one though I have tried not to give a false impression.

Ruth continues at some length about her plans to assist Owen’s artistic development — helping him to be free to work by managing all the daily details. She dreams of managing their finances by renting out their property on the Riviera for income so “Owen will never have to tie himself to earn our living by his painting.”

However, Ruth makes a prophetic observation concerning how she will come to be viewed:

Perhaps of us two [Ruth and Owen] I realize better than Owen how hard our first years are going to be, and though I am not at all afraid of being poor, yet I know it often brings with it worries and sadness which spoil one’s disposition if not one’s character. So it is not being poor which we are going to be on our guard against, but being spoiled by being poor — for we know that the road is going to be very hard and perhaps we shall never be in a position to entirely disregard the question of the “cost.”

Later in the same letter, in a passage which seems to foreshadow Merton’s own thoughts written about letting go of any artistic endeavor, Ruth states:

It may well be for people to say that the greatest artists have always been scourged by difficult circumstances to do their finest work, but the question is always whether they would not have done ten times finer work if their scourge had been a little less heavy, and I believe that one should earn one’s dinner by good hard common labor, and one’s dessert by one’s art if the inspiration comes, and if it does not come, well then do without dessert, but don’t force either the inspiration nor the labor, to supply what it never was meant to supply.

Back in Douglaston in November, Ruth wrote again to Gertrude:

Tonight I feel close to you — I would give almost anything if you were near enough really and truly to have a long long talk about Owen.

Sometimes I am so homesick to see him that I do not want to do anything but go to sleep and wake up months hence and find him here.

How well you understand all that!

I have had some enlargements made from snapshots I thought good of Owen and

am sending you one and keeping one myself — they are just for us two because we love him better than anyone else in the world.

While the letters are intended to reassure Gertrude of Ruth's virtue and noble intentions, they reveal passion, thoughtfulness, empathy and sympathy. Ruth's effort to forge a strong bond with the mother of the man she loves reveals particularly her value of relationship and relatedness.

While it is true to say that Merton makes some harsh comments about Ruth in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it is also true that he wrote a delightful description of her that somewhat balances his statements about his father Owen, and which was omitted in the published version of the autobiography. In *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, Michael Mott comments: "The editorial cuts make Ruth even more enigmatic, remote, cold than she is in the original."<sup>5</sup> Here is a paragraph from the unedited manuscript.

But she [Ruth] had taste. She painted landscapes too. She designed houses. She designed all sorts of houses we might one day have lived in, in Prades, if there had not been so much of a war. She decorated the apartment where I was born, or maybe it was a house. Later, she wrote articles for those magazines about how to be a scientific housewife, and how to bring up children according to all the latest methods in 1915. Also, she danced. I don't mean, by that, that she would go to a dance and dance the waltz, the way they used to in those days: she danced those dances people do on the stage, with pirouettes and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Monica Furlong notes in her biography of Merton that Ruth Jenkins "was a talented girl who used to dance to entertain her classmates" at Bradford Academy.<sup>7</sup> Upon graduating from Bradford, Ruth in fact won a monetary prize for an essay she had written.

I suggest that this view of Ruth as a young woman who loved to dance (along with her self-revelatory letters to Gertrude), contradicts the image of her as seen through the eyes of her child Tom. I think that Ruth deserves further study along with our sympathy. It was extremely difficult for Ruth to accept Owen's failure as an artist and her own inability to raise funds as she had previously planned. While Ruth was, in Mott's phrase, a practical idealist, the advent of World War I conspired against her dreams and ambitions for herself and her family when they were forced to leave France. Once back in the United States she had to cope with an increasingly difficult relationship with Owen, chronic financial woes and, within a few years, the fatal and extremely painful illness.

Ruth the artist was also an extremely articulate woman. As a new mother she kept scrupulous yet tender notes on her baby's development from which she created "Tom's Book" (Mott, p. 46). While "Tom's Book" shows a meticulous sense of detail, it is clear that she has a genuine sense of love and affection for baby Tom. Ruth is a conscientious mother: she reads child psychology books; records Merton's development including a list of his vocabulary; organizes a careful, regular routine; gives special care to the selection of the foods he ate; and is attentive to his needs. She was obviously successful as a mother as a record shows Merton's vigorous development, weight gain and behaviors which denote a thriving baby. Merton's low birth weight of 4.4 pounds indicates that he was a premature baby. He was born at home in a foreign land during a snowstorm and he would have required very special care and nurturing. There is very little doubt that Ruth proves her competence as a mother simply because Merton survived those crucial first days of his life.

Here is an excerpt from a long entry in Tom's Book" from November, 1916:

When he hears music he begins to dance, changing to fast or slow steps as the music changes.

Sometimes when he is playing, he sings, but without much tune.

When we go out he seems conscious of everything. Sometimes he puts up his arms and cries out "Oh Sui! Oh joli! Often it is to the birds or trees that he makes these pagan hymns of joy. Sometimes he throws himself on the ground to see the "cunnin little ants"

(where he learned that expression, I do not know!) . . . But from the time he was a few months old and began to furiously kick and scream whenever he had to be dressed or undressed, I found that he kept quiet if I sang or talked to him. So it seemed to me it tired him less to listen to words and songs than to resist with all his might; *and that is how he began to be interested in words and sounds.* [Italics added]

As Michael Mott and Anthony Padovano suggest, it was Ruth who began Merton's writing career. It would seem that Merton picked up his life long journal writing where she left off. The last writing that Ruth did, the letter to Tom, written from the public ward of the notorious Bellevue Hospital where she had languished for seven months, has also brought criticism of her. But viewed realistically, remembering that attitudes and customs have changed dramatically since 1921 when children were not allowed as visitors in hospitals, Ruth did perhaps the only thing possible for her: she wrote a letter of farewell to her first born son. Perhaps the question that should be asked is why Owen did not stay with the six year old Tom after he gave him Ruth's letter. While some of these observations are speculative, the indisputable fact is that Ruth died when Merton was six years old, causing a premature separation and a tie with his mother that was to take a lifetime to resolve. It was at this juncture in his life that Merton began his restless peregrinations physically and mentally, and thus began his search for paradise.

To my mind the first major positive attempt to resolve the tie with his mother and the first step toward realization of paradise came when Merton joined the Roman Catholic Church in November, 1938. According to psychologist William Willeford, "mother" could not be made into the symbol "Mother Church" if "mother did not already mean, implicitly, much of what "church" means, including protection, love, compassion, propriety, concern with community and tradition, physical and spiritual nourishment, and connection with the great periodicities of nature."<sup>8</sup> With the possible exception of Aunt Maud whom Merton admired greatly and with whom he had a loving relationship, and perhaps the happy times with Mme. Privat, Merton's experiences with women were, prior to entering the Abbey, superficial or limited in scope.

Aunt Maud died in November, 1933, two years after Owen. Mott writes: "Aunt Maud became a model by which he measured others for the rest of his life. She also becomes something of a symbol . . . of bucolic England." While Merton's grandmothers, "Bonnamaman" Jenkins and "Granny" Merton, may have had some positive influence, that influence was of limited importance (Mott, p. 45).<sup>9</sup> It should be remembered that for a time following Ruth's death, there had been a negative mother figure in novelist Evelyn Scott (see Daggy, "Birthday Theology"). It should be noted also that while the boarding schools in France and England provided classical education, there was little nurturing and a great many hardships for a motherless child. However, Merton was in one way always connected to the mother archetype and that is through the writing that began in his early childhood. His writing combines the outward and inner movement of his search for paradise. The realization of his gift for writing seemed to require a structure that was provided by the landscape of the Church within the enclosure of Gethsemani. Padovano writes: "The tension in Merton between anarchy and discipline proved creative. Too much of either would have destroyed him as an artist. The secret of his genius has something to do with the balance between extremes" (Padovano, p. 7). It seems to me that the feminine archetypes of the church, cloister and enclosed garden, with Mary as both garden and idealized woman, along with all the conflicts and resultant tensions of his life as a monk and writer in the Abbey, provided Merton with the right climate in which to develop a mature identity, and to recover and integrate the feminine.

Thus, the second important step was Merton's entry into the monastery. The church and the abbey provided comfort, shelter and security to a young man who as a precocious and brainy schoolboy had learned to conceal his feelings and extreme shyness behind a brilliant and sometimes sarcastic wit. Perhaps more importantly, within the structure of the abbey, Merton regained the sense of structure that Ruth had provided, although he remembered it as a negative experience (her "Little University," etc.). Also, the church and the abbey contained an idealized symbol of the mother archetype in the Mother of God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom he soon came to address as the Queen of Poets. He dedicated his first two volumes of poetry, *Thirty Poems* (1944) and *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), to her in this guise. In *The Sign of Jonas*, he indicated just

how important Mary was to him: “Our Lady is my guide in the interior life.”<sup>10</sup> Merton writes in the dedication to *Gethsemani Magnificat*: “The Most Blessed Virgin is the Queen of the Cistercian order, as she is also Queen and Model of the Contemplative Life. Every monastery in the Order is dedicated to her, and the Cistercian Order itself was the first to be consecrated to her alone. The function of each Cistercian monastery is the same as was the function of Our Blessed Lady on earth: to bring down God’s grace to men.” (I think he would later have added “women” to this statement.)

Interestingly, Mary was viewed allegorically as the Hortensius Conclusus in the Middle Ages. She was seen as the enclosed four-walled garden which fits the ancient Persian description of paradise, the Garden of Eden.<sup>11</sup> The garden enclosed within four walls is also represented by the closed community of men dedicated to finding the mercy of God. As he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about being a postulant: “I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom” (*SSM*, p. 372). The garden is also represented in the natural landscape that surrounded the abbey and that Merton later escaped into as often as he could. Carl Jung’s numerology assigns the numeral four the symbol of wholeness, and to use another term favored by Jung, the four walls enclosed a safe and sacred place which he named *temenos*. Ironically Merton was to discover that the Abbey was not the paradise he first believed it to be. As Mott writes of Merton’s early days at Gethsemani: “If the walled Paradise, the Court of the Queen of Heaven, came at times to seem to him the prison of Prisoner’s Base, it is only fair to point out that Gethsemani changed, too. What must have appeared so stable in an unstable world in 1941 was transformed” (Mott, p. 206). Notwithstanding, the Abbey did provide the necessary structure and nurturing that he needed to develop and mature not only as a man and monk but as an artist and writer.

Merton’s restlessness did not end when he entered Gethsemani and is well documented in *The Sign of Jonas*. He constantly questioned himself and his abbot as to his vocation as a Trappist. The lure of a more severe and silent order as a distant paradise beckoned to him. Yet it was to be at Gethsemani, an initially unrealized paradise if you will, that Merton did in fact recover a sense of paradise as an interior state of being which came out of the crucible of conflict, suffering and endurance that forged a deep spirituality, a mature and whole adult and that paradisaical condition of spirit, a sense of union centered on his deep experience of God.<sup>12</sup>

In 1958, one year before Merton wrote the prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, he wrote in his journal: “Something was missing . . . whenever religion ignored or undervalued the feminine as the essential half of wholeness” (Mott, p. 315). Michael Higgins relates this idea to the paradise theme. He writes that “Merton’s way back into Eden is like Blake’s, through the imagination . . . [and the] recovery in verse . . . [of] the paradisaical moment.” However, Higgins also points out that “the poet will recover paradise because he loves” and Merton wrote in Cable 74 that “the poet is nurtured by Sophia/ Virgin/ Urthona, the love of whom is paradise.”<sup>13</sup>

To my mind, the prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, written in 1959 and published in 1963 in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, is Merton’s pivotal work that illustrates his integration of the mother archetype, the recovery of a sense of unity, and the integration of Christ in himself as the recovery of paradise. *Hagia Sophia* is a hymn of praise to Sophia, the Feminine Wisdom of God, and to Mary, Merton’s blessed guide and strength. Near the end of the poem Merton crowns Mary as “the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia.” Mary becomes the “personal manifestation of Sophia.”<sup>14</sup> Merton continued to describe the combined figure of Mary and Sophia as the most perfect of mothers, “all-prudent, all-loving, all-pure person . . . the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy.”

It is Mary/Sophia who “sends” Christ “in His mission of inexpressible mercy, to die for us on the Cross.” The poem concludes with the stark and simple image of Christ as “A vagrant, a destitute wanderer . . . . A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers . . . a frail expendable exile [who] lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.” As Merton’s poet-persona becomes identified with the “vagrant . . . homeless God,” this identification then suggests that the figures Mary and Sophia are Ruth and that it was her “consent” that sent Merton “poor and helpless . . . a destitute wanderer . . . down a new road” (*CP*, pp. 370-371).

## NOTES

1. Regarding Merton's relationship with his father, Owen Merton, see especially Robert E. Daggy, "Birthday Theology: A Reflection on Thomas Merton and the Bermuda Menage," *The Kentucky Review* 7 (Summer 1987): no. 2, pp. 62-89.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1948), p. 14. Hereafter referred to as *SSM*.
3. Mario Jacoby, *The Longing for Paradise: Psychological Perspectives on an Archetype* (Boston: Sigo Press, 1985), p. 46).
4. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 8. Hereafter referred to as Padovano.
5. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), p. 9. Hereafter referred to as Mott.
6. Carbon typescript of *The Seven Storey Mountain* at the Burns Library, Merton Collection, Boston College, p. 4.
7. Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 8.
8. William Willeford, *Feeling, Imagination, and the Self: Transformation of the Mother-Infant Relationship* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University press, 1987), p. 194.
9. Bonnie B. Thurston, "'I Never Had a Sister': Merton's Friendships with Women," *The Merton Seasonal* 17 (Winter 1992): no. 2, pp. 4-8. See also Mott, p. 445, on Merton's dream linking his mother with the nurse "S" in June, 1966).
10. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1953), p. 116.
11. Mac Griswold, *Pleasures of the Garden* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1985), p. 16.
12. See William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 14.
13. Michael W. Higgins, "Merton and the Real Poets: Paradise Re-Bugged," *The Merton Annual* 3 (New York: AMS Press, 1990), p. 181.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 369-370. Hereafter referred to as *CP*.