

Rediscovering the True Self through the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton

By **David Odorisio**

Therefore there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God.¹

This exposition is about Thomas Merton's development as a human being and the way Merton, in discovering his self, found a true Christian compassion for other human beings. What is most appealing about this topic is that these themes – the discovery of self and the challenge to love – are universal and confront each of us daily. Thomas Merton knew well the confrontation between what he came to call the “false self,” the superficial, “non-real” part of him, and the “true self,” the self that Merton knew he was called to be. This struggle is explicitly portrayed throughout his life and writings.

The discovery of the true self can be broken down into three stages. These stages, however, are in no way separate from one another, as each ties into the other, affecting the growth process. The stages are: understanding of self, understanding of God through contemplation, and ultimately, understanding of others, which takes the form of compassion.² According to Merton, we can begin to understand or know ourselves only when we view our essential identity as intimately related to God. It is through the act of contemplation that we come to understand this identity. Finally, at the highest level of self-realization, we fulfill our self by compassionately reaching out to others.

In contemporary psychological terminology, Thomas Merton had a high tendency for self-actualization. In spiritual terms, though, Merton was a seeker; he was looking for “the more.” Merton's quest for self-understanding consumed his late adolescence and young adulthood.³ Before Merton's conversion to Catholicism, and prior to his ultimate entrance into Our Lady of Gethsemani Trappist Abbey in 1941, he was a wild, reckless, but intelligent youth. Merton had a passion for literature, and he kept a journal from his college days until the day he died. Merton also had a passion for partying and for women. It is a controversial issue but well-known fact that Merton fathered a son, the account of which was censored from the final edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*.⁴

More importantly, though, Merton had from an early age a holy longing – a need for more. Merton was not



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satisfied with his reckless lifestyle; he did not know himself or his true identity as a human being. Merton's conversion is a beautiful, passionate story, but more importantly it outlines the most fundamental conflict in the hearts of human beings, the false versus the true self: who we think we are, based on other people's perceptions, our "status" in society or who we have been told we are from an early age, versus the true self, who we are as God sees us.

Merton entered Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941 at the age of 26. When Merton entered the abbey, he came with the mindset that he was running from the world, that he was done with it forever. He was done with war, done with prejudice, done with the illusions of the world. Merton reflects upon his entrance to the Order: "I was free . . . free of all the anxieties and worries and sorrows that belong to this earth, and the love of the things that are in it" (*SSM* 370). Ironically, Merton was anything but correct in assuming that his life would continue along such an illusion, that he could simply leave all his problems at the door and live a completely new life in some alternate reality.

As Merton continued to create a new role and identity for himself, all he continued to do was run from his true identity and mask his true self. Merton believed that he could simply leave his interior darkness at the monastery gate, and this was his greatest mistake, for the first truth that Merton learned as a monk was that God does not let you by-pass your self. Merton learned that before we can even begin to know our own Creator, or any other human being for that matter, we must first come to terms with ourselves: with all our faults, failings, guilt, false impressions, prejudices, and fears.

What these faults and fears constitute in us is our false self. Merton writes, "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him" (*NSC* 34). This self alienates us from who we really are by alienating us from God and from others. If we hate ourselves, if we have a poor self-image, we are only going to project that upon everyone around us, even going so far as re-imagining our God to fit our false projections!⁵

The false self is, ultimately, our self-centered immaturity. It is our illusory clinging to a time in our lives when we were taken care of by everyone other than ourselves. The false self is also given to us, and sometimes even forced onto us. Continual abuse from an early age, both physical and emotional, for example, could give us the impression that we are worthless, inferior, or stupid. Such regular abuse molds our way of viewing our self until it becomes the way we view our self. Merton had first-hand experience with such psychological issues and their impact on the psyche. His position as Novice Master enabled him to deal directly with novices suffering from many of the above-mentioned abuses.⁶

The danger of the false self is when we let it own us or become our identity. When we begin to think and act like the character or the actor that we have either let ourselves become or that has been forced upon us, we begin to live an illusory life. We hide from who we truly are by hiding from our interior darkness, the stuff that keeps us from realizing our true identity. Merton writes, "Rationalizing and excusing the lusts and ambitions of a selfish and fleshly ego, camouflaging its own defects and magnifying the sins of others, evading its countless fears, forcing itself to believe its own lies, the psyche of man struggles in a thousand ways to silence the secret voice of anxiety" (*NM* 116). Our false self distorts our reality by leading us to believe that this self is our identity; we then begin to reconstruct reality to fit to it. Merton writes that by putting our false self between God and our true

identity we mentally reconstruct the entire universe in our own image and likeness, not God's (*NM* 117). Our false self creates a false world where we are the center: considering ourselves as completely autonomous self-serving units we strand ourselves, and we have got to make sense of it all – a daunting task to say the very least.⁷

This distortion of reality is what Merton came to understand as original sin. We are born into the world with blinders on that force us into the illusory thinking of the false self. There is, however, a piece in all of us that remains untouched by illusion, and this is our hope. It may be buried under years of life experience but it remains there. This is the image or mirror of God within us; this is our true self. The love of God, experienced through Christ, enables the Christian to live a life free of these blinders. To Merton, it is contemplation that connects us with God's healing love, allowing us to see the image of God in ourselves and others. Contemplation is the tool that cleans our internal mirror, allowing it to shine brighter and brighter, and allows us to gain a clearer and clearer understanding of who we truly are.

Merton believes that to begin the seemingly impossible journey to wholeness, we need only to ask one simple but profound question, "Who Am I, not relative to this or that aspect of my being, but rather who am I ultimately before God . . . who am I absolutely?" (Finley 18). We must be willing to be no one else but who we are fundamentally, not superficially. This requires self-honesty and discipline. Merton writes, "The first step in all this [our journey] is to recognize our true condition. Before we can ever hope to find ourselves in God, we must clearly recognize the fact that we are far from Him" (*NM* 119). It is only through being honest with ourselves that any sort of personal progress can be made, and it is only through our struggle that freedom from our self-alienated condition is possible.

It is, however, the first step on the journey that may be the most difficult. Merton writes: "Finding our heart' and recovering this awareness of our inmost identity implies the recognition that our external, everyday self is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication. It is not our true self. And indeed our true self is not easy to find. It is hidden in obscurity and 'nothingness,' at the center where we are in direct dependence on God."⁸ The difficulty lies in realizing that, as Merton points out, our "external, everyday self" is not who we truthfully are called to be. This does not come easily, and usually leads the person into further denial or escape. Ultimately, we as human beings cannot hide from our fundamental identity as creatures of God. Our true self will in some way or another force its way into consciousness. We have all been scarred in some way, and that is why the discovery of our fundamental self takes a lifetime. We are never a finished product.

Seeing God in ourselves and in others may seem impossible because in reality the world is not very conducive to the spiritual journey. Everywhere we turn, false idols, false advertising and false friendships, to name only a few of the illusions in life, constantly and consistently bombard us. Also, constant inner despair, doubt and uncertainty plague us throughout the journey. Merton writes, "[T]he full maturity of the spiritual life cannot be reached unless we first pass through the dread, anguish, trouble and fear that necessarily accompany the inner crisis of 'spiritual death' in which we finally abandon our attachment to our exterior self and surrender completely to Christ" (*CMP* 147-48). This struggle is in the very nature of our being; it exists in us all. Some, however, simply choose to ignore it. It is, nevertheless, the only path that gives birth to our true self.

This struggle is what greeted Thomas Merton when he entered Gethsemani in 1941. Fortunately, however, when faced with his weaknesses, Merton, instead of hiding or denying them, grew

from them. Merton's 1966 poem, "All the Way Down," is a retrospective description of his personal self-cleansing:

I went down
Into the cavern
All the way down
To the bottom of the sea.
I went down lower
Than Jonas and the whale
No one ever got so far down
As me.

I went down lower
Than any diamond mine
Deeper than the lowest hole
In Kimberly
All the way down
I thought I was the devil
He was no deeper down
Than me.

And when they thought
That I was gone forever
That I was all the way
In hell
I got right back into my body
And came back out
And rang my bell.

No matter how
They try to harm me now
No matter where
They lay me in the grave
No matter what injustices they do
I've seen the root
Of all that believe.

I've seen the room
Where life and death are made
And I have known
The secret forge of war
I even saw the womb
That all things come from
For I got down so far!

But when they thought
 That I was gone forever
 That I was all the way
 In hell
 I got right back into my body
 And came back out
 And rang my bell.⁹

Merton's description of the journey into his depths borders on the terrible and horrific, but only in these depths and in confronting these horrors does the image of God within us begin to shine. James Finley writes:

Merton leads us along the journey to God in which the self that begins the journey is not the self that arrives. The self that begins is the self that we thought ourselves to be. It is this self that dies along the way until in the end 'no one' is left. This 'no one' is our true self. It is the self that stands prior to all that is this or that. It is the self in God, the self bigger than death yet born of death. It is the self the Father forever loves (Finley 17).

It is through facing our demons while all through our journey "ringing our bell" – acknowledging God's presence¹⁰ – that our path to the true self leads from down in our depths outward towards freedom.

Although the journey to the true self places a large emphasis on the death of the false self, the major emphasis must rightly be placed on the goal, which is a life reconciled to God, to our true nature. St. Paul writes:

What are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:1-4).

To Merton, the only way to deal with our pain authentically and to walk in Paul's "newness of life" is not by concentrating solely on the negative aspects of our selves, but by always "ringing our bell" – reminding ourselves of the joy that is to come, not in some other-worldly paradise, but here on earth. Our hope lies not in death but in the belief that no matter how devastating our journey appears, it ultimately leads us to life and to freedom – freedom that is born from seeing ourselves as God sees us: as "beautiful and new-born as the dew" (cf. Ps. 110).

Merton believes that it is through contemplation that we taste this paradise and ultimately live in it. To Merton, contemplation is the path to God, which is therefore the sole path to our true selves – seeing ourselves as God sees us. Contemplation is a difficult subject, especially in the realm of language, because it is so hard to define. Merton offers a few explanations of what contemplation is (or is not): "Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. . . . It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life It is gratitude for life, for

awareness and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source." Contemplation is "a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts" (*NSC* 1). It is at this level of faith experience that the healing process and new life begin. The contemplative experience heals and reconciles us with our true self and consequently with God. Merton writes, "The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. . . . Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in [God]" (*NSC* 35). Contemplation is the level of experience where our false self comes face to face with the "love and mercy of God" and witnesses the reconciling power of Christ.

In contemplation our internal mirror, the image of God within us, begins to truly shine. Merton writes:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal . . . which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.¹¹

The "pure diamond" in us is our true self. Contemplation enables us to reach in and touch it, but in order to do this we must first be quiet, be inside ourselves and be alone. This is the only path if we are to find "the way out of this whole dilemma," which is to get "back to our most fundamental relationship to God," not where we control God, but where both "in life and in death" we depend entirely on God (Finley 72).

This is yet another difficult step in the contemplative journey. It requires that we must submit, give in to God and let go of our false self and false desires. We must let go of that control that we so love and crave and yet which is ultimately the main illusion keeping us from God. Finley writes, "[O]ur deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what we want to do but rather in our freedom to become who God wills us to be" (Finley 73). We must be able and willing to let go of everything within us that is not God, in order to make a room, a home, for the experience and love of God to rest. Merton writes, "The only full and authentic purification is that which turns [us] completely inside out, so that [we] no longer [have] a self to defend" (*CMP* 147). God is not authentically and fully present unless there is no one or no thing left in us but God.

Merton found the same struggle to be rid of the false self mirrored in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. Merton also found a language for his contemplative experience in silence and a way of understanding it in the Zen practice of "no thought." This is why Merton was so attracted to Zen. He found an expression for the expressionless, where we get quiet and let the Absolute do the talking, where we let the experience speak for itself and do not attempt to control it, or limit it by our own concepts, language or false self. James Finley, a one-time novice under Merton, writes of an experience he had with Merton about Zen and contemplation: "Merton once told me to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said, 'How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun.'" Finley later reflected, "Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time" (Finley 115-16). God's time is not human time, linear time. Rather, God's time is an absence of time; it is

when time stands still and all we are left with is our experience of self, true or false, whatever it may be. This is true contemplation.

In this regard, the experience of self is radically out of our control, especially our intellectual control. When we get in touch with our budding self, all we can do is provide an atmosphere and attitude of prayerful contemplation that allows the self to blossom. We cannot control the blossoming; it is only by letting go, surrendering our control, that we are led to freedom. Ironically, as soon as we think we have arrived, we are just as lost as before; when we think we have it, "it" disappears. Hence one of Merton's favorite Zen sayings: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him."¹² Whatever we think God is, it cannot therefore be God.

Through solitude and silence, both exterior and interior, Merton found the means to a greater contemplative experience and a greater experience of God and self. Merton craved and longed for greater silence and solitude throughout his entire life, and he frequently romanticized and especially agonized over his desire to join a more eremitical Order, the Carthusians.¹³ It was not until 1965, however, that he was granted permission to move to a hermitage in the woods outside the Abbey walls, a move he had argued in favor of for over ten years.

Silence and solitude were essential elements in Merton's spiritual and personal development, especially in his process of self-becoming and self-healing. Merton writes:

One of the first essentials of . . . interior solitude [is that] . . . a man takes responsibility for his own inner life. . . . And he takes upon himself the lonely, barely comprehensible, incommunicable task of working his way through the darkness of his own mystery until he discovers that his mystery and the mystery of God merge into one reality . . . the only reality.¹⁴

Silence and solitude force us to confront whatever it is that is lurking inside us. They provide the physical opportunity to "confront self-deception and bad faith," forcing the solitary to "first come to terms with his own inner emptiness."¹⁵ Solitude and silence allow no further hiding from our interior turmoil. Merton writes in a journal entry from August 10, 1965, a few days before he entered the hermitage, "I do not see how the really solitary life can tolerate illusion and self-deception. It seems to me that solitude rips off all the masks and all the disguises. It does not tolerate lies. Everything but straight and direct affirmation is marked and judged by the silence of the forest."¹⁶ Merton had finally found the key, the means, to realizing the fulfillment of his self by uniting with the loving mystery of God.

Merton, however, could also be very critical of his eremitical life. In his writings, notably his essay, "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," published in *Disputed Questions*, he outlines two types of solitude, which he fittingly distinguishes as "true" and "false" solitude. False solitude is characteristically selfish. It is the solitude that is sought by the individual who in contempt of mankind runs to the hills, so to speak, to be done with human beings forever. Merton later comments, "if you imagine the solitary as 'one' who has numerically isolated himself from 'many others,' who has simply gone out of the crowd to hang up his individual number on a rock in the desert . . . you have a false and demonic solitude. This is solipsism, not solitude. It is the false unity of separateness."¹⁷ To Merton, false solitude is not only a form of evil; it is irrational, caused by anger rather than love or reason. It is simply not possible, as long as you are alive, to hide from other people.

The deeper evil with false solitude, however, is its ego-centrism. John Teahan writes that Merton

“knew that pursuing solitude can be selfish and egoistic. Some solitaries, hoping to appear pious and exceptional, ignore the legitimate needs of other people”; this type of false solitude “categorically rejects the world” (Teahan 524). The main problem, therefore, is a solitude or silence that lacks love. This is reminiscent of the young Merton who too, like the false solitary, attempted to “categorically reject” others. The mature Merton, however, had come full circle, becoming the “true solitary.”

True solitude, to Merton, is all-inclusive. It never closes its mind or heart, but continually expands in love and compassion toward others. It is through true solitude that Merton found healing, for in this solitude he experienced the love of God. Merton writes, “The solitary . . . seeks a spiritual and simple oneness in himself which, when it is found, paradoxically becomes the oneness of all men” (*DQ* 182). Merton believed that if each human being could find his own solitude, especially amidst the confusion of daily life, only then would a healthy, love-filled society result. He came to “conjoin solitude with love” (Teahan 525), showing that the “true unity of the solitary life is the one in which there is no possible division. The true solitary does not seek himself, but loses himself” (*LL* 16). Thus, when we become one with our true self we become one with all.

Henri Nouwen writes, “Just as we can only enter into a real intimate relation with one another when we first get to know our own identities . . . so Merton was really in the position to occupy himself critically with his world only after he had found his own solitude.”¹⁸ In March 1958, Thomas Merton had an experience that changed his attitude toward the world, allowing him to “occupy himself critically” with it. He was walking through the shopping district of downtown Louisville when, in the middle of a crowd of people, he had a vision that he later recorded in his journal:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness . . . [I]t was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. . . . I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other (*CGB* 140, 142).

The world Merton returned to was “a world transfigured by his contemplative vision,” a world he now saw through the eyes of compassion.¹⁹

This newfound and profound sense of compassion led Merton to take a second look at the world, and what he saw was not very different from what he himself had experienced in his seventeen years as a Trappist monk. What Merton saw was a world of human beings, vulnerable, confused, desperate, hopeful, just as he was. Nouwen writes, “Merton knew . . . that the sin, evil and violence that he found in the world, were the same sin, the same evil, and the same violence that he had discovered in his own heart through solitude, silence, and prayer. The impurity in the world was a mirror of the impurity in his own heart” (Nouwen 63). It was only when Merton had found the image of God within himself – his true self – that he could then begin to truly and unselfishly love others.

William Shannon notes the irony that “this mystical experience took place, not in the monastery chapel or in the monastery’s woods, but in the very center of a shopping district” (Shannon 191). It was when other human beings, the same human beings that Merton had attempted to hide from his entire life, surrounded him that he had his most life-altering mystical encounter. Shannon comments, “Little did [Merton] realize when he spoke his exuberant farewell to the world [by entering Gethsemani] that [his] interior journey would bring him back once again into the world he thought he had forsaken” (Shannon 178). Unbeknownst to Merton, it was his own monastic vocation that would eventually come full circle and lead him back into the very same world he had left behind seventeen years earlier.

From this point onward, Merton’s life took a drastic turn toward the world, toward people. He increased his correspondence from just his friends and close associates to authors, poets, social activists, Sufis, Rabbis, Zen Masters and theologians among many others.²⁰ Merton wrote to Dorothy Day in support of her Catholic Worker movement, and to simply let her know that she was in his prayers. He wrote to psychoanalyst Erich Fromm about his works on the de-humanization of society. He wrote to Abraham Heschel about the nature of prophecy. He wrote to D. T. Suzuki about the Zen koan tradition, among many other subjects. He wrote to Pope John XXIII after his election, and to Jacqueline Kennedy and Coretta Scott King after their husbands were assassinated.²¹ One common theme characteristic of all Merton’s correspondence, however, is its warmth and sincerity. Merton wanted nothing more than to learn about, share ideas with and show love to these people.

The books he wrote after his Fourth and Walnut experience also changed from the spiritual and contemplative-centered writing that he was known for toward more active, justice-centered themes. Books such as *Faith and Violence*,²² *Contemplation in a World of Action* and *Seeds of Destruction*²³ all show a man no longer content to stand on the sidelines and be a spectator. *Faith and Violence* consists of numerous essays on non-violence. *Contemplation in a World of Action* details Merton’s view for the future of monastic life, focusing on renewal. *Seeds of Destruction* is another book of essays, this one focusing on prejudice and the turmoil that was rampant in the South at that time.

Merton’s poetry also took a turn toward compassion. His “Original Child Bomb” (CP 291), published in 1962, and “Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces” (CP 345), published in 1963, detail the horrors of World War II and prophetically point to a future where these events are not far from recurring. Merton’s passion for justice could not be contained; it overshadowed all areas of his life. He wanted to show the world that he – a monk, a human being – cared. He wanted the world to know that he was a member of the human race and was not going to sit back and watch his country, his people, destroy themselves.

Merton’s Fourth and Walnut experience proved to him that contemplation is intimately related to social concern and outreach. He came to understand that “true contemplation leads inevitably to social concern and action,” not that they are two separate or different realities.²⁴ Contemplation is never “an escape from time and matter or from social responsibility. It is rather a journey into the desert of [our] own soul to discover there the meaning and mystery of life, thus enabling [us] to be [ourselves] and feel a oneness with all others. This is the social dimension of contemplation.”²⁵ The self is always intimately related to the other by compassion. If there is ever a separation, a dis-unity, then we are neither authentically being our true self, nor authentically living true compassion.

Merton successfully synthesized the two poles of contemplation and social action that he once thought were in opposition. He came to learn that, “We do not go into the desert to escape people but

to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them the most good" (NSC 80). Merton came to deeply understand that contemplation and social action are both necessary and necessarily connected tools needed to live the passionate, joy-filled existence that we as Christians, as human beings are called to live. Merton reached a point of wholeness, of completeness in his monastic vocation and in his vocation as a human being.

Merton's vision and worldview were bred directly from his contemplative life. When he got down in himself and "saw the womb / That all things come from," Merton found life: a life that is empty if not lived for others, a life that is empty if not fueled by love, a life that is empty if it is found to lack compassion. When Merton looked deep down into his being, he found a man who had been through the pain common to all humanity: heartache, longing, despair, lust, pride and, finally, he was able to transcend, rejoicing in it all, rejoicing in being human. Merton wrote after his Fourth and Walnut conversion, "Thank God, thank God that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others" (CGB 141). Through his "down and out" journey Merton arrived as the "New Man," reconciled to God, reconciled to his true self, and reconciled to others, so that in 1961, twenty years after he first entered Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey, he was able to write, "Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name" (NSC 60).

1 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 36; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.

2 This analysis is my own, from observations of Merton's life and development. Richard Anthony Cashen also offers an analysis of "three basic discoveries" found in solitude (God, true identity and communion with all people) in his "Solitude in the Thought of Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 40 (1981) 73.

3 Cf. Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) for details on his life prior to entering religious life; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.

4 Cf. M. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) xi-xii. Pennington writes that when Merton was asked by the censors to delete the passage about the pregnancy, he wrote back questioning why it was fine for St. Augustine to have a son out of wedlock, but scandalous for himself. The censor's terse reply was, "You're no St. Augustine."

5 Cf. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961) 111; subsequent references will be cited as "NM" parenthetically in the text.

6 Cf. "The Identity Crisis," the third chapter of *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 56-81, for a psychological analysis of "the monk," stemming from Merton's observations as Novice Master.

7 James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978) 67; subsequent references will be cited as "Finley" parenthetically in the text.

8 Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1969) 97; subsequent references will be cited as "CMP" parenthetically in the text.

9 Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 669-70; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text.

10 In the monastery the bells are a central part of monastic life. The bells call the monk to daily activity, especially from work to prayer. In this poem, the bells symbolize Merton's self-reminder that no matter how far into the depths of his inner darkness he travels God's unconditional love is there.

11 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

12 Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 77.

13 See Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and Writer. Journals, vol. 2: 1941-1952*, ed. Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) for a full account of his vocational confusion.

14 Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960) 180; subsequent references will be cited as "DQ" parenthetically in the text.

- 15 John F. Teahan, "Solitude: A Central Motif in Thomas Merton's Life and Writings," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 50 (1982) 526-27; subsequent references will be cited as "Teahan" parenthetically in the text.
- 16 Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 278.
- 17 Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 16; subsequent references will be cited as "LL" parenthetically in the text.
- 18 Henri Nouwen, *Pray to Live: Thomas Merton, Contemplative Critic* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1972) 41; subsequent references will be cited as "Nouwen" parenthetically in the text.
- 19 William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 178; subsequent references will be cited as "Shannon" parenthetically in the text.
- 20 Merton's published correspondence spans five volumes and well over 2,000 pages.
- 21 Cf. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) for a full account of each of the aforementioned correspondences.
- 22 Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).
- 23 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965).
- 24 James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971) 47-48.
- 25 David W. Givey, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983) 30.