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## Standing Where Roads Converge: The Thomas Merton Papers at Syracuse University

Terrance Keenan  
*Syracuse University*

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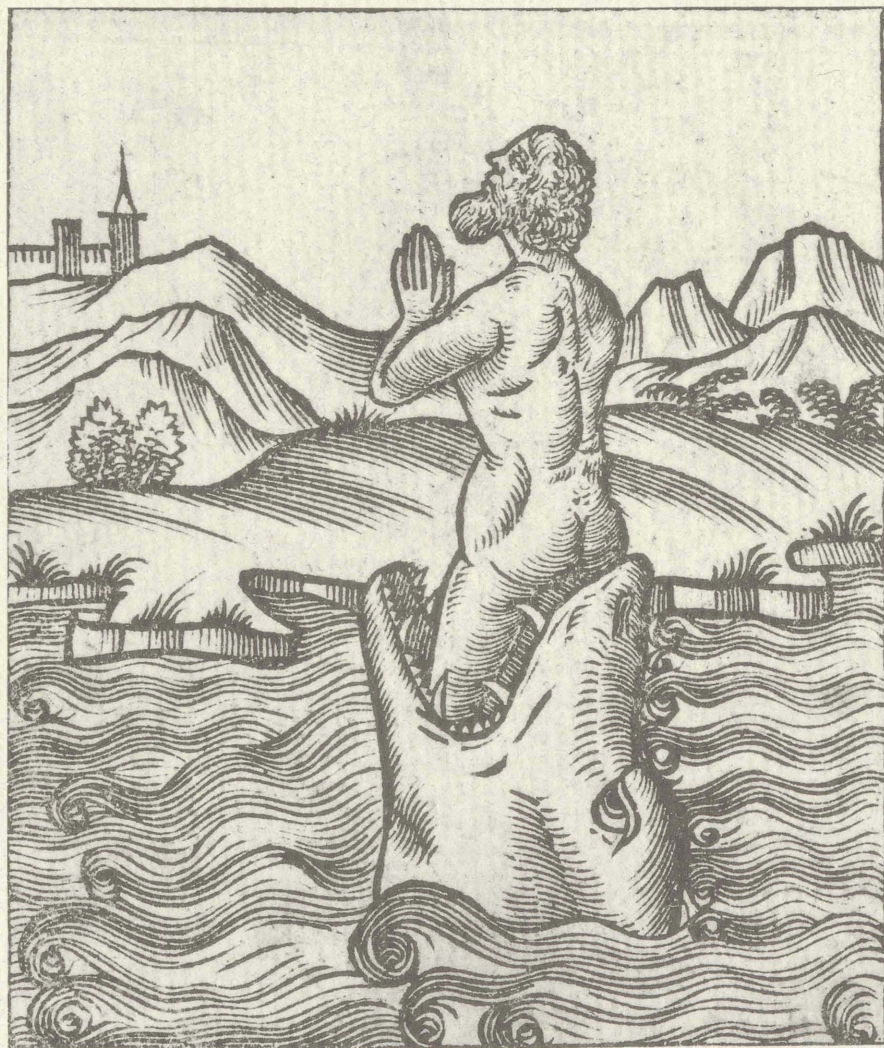
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*Dedicated to William Pearson Tolley (1900–1996)*

# Standing Where Roads Converge: The Thomas Merton Papers at Syracuse University

BY TERRANCE KEENAN

THE LATE NOVELIST Donald Braider once referred to Thomas Merton as “Tom the Talking Trappist.” Certainly, for a monk cloistered in the Trappist Abbey of Gethemani in Kentucky for nearly twenty years, he had a lot to say. It is hard to overestimate his influence as a spiritual writer; his first book, the 1948 autobiographical story of his conversion, *Seven Story Mountain*, is still in print.

In the few years before his untimely death in 1968, Syracuse University Library staff corresponded with Merton and received as a gift a small collection of papers from his last important period, in which he explored the spiritual traditions of other faiths in considerable depth.

Merton was born in France in 1915. As the son of an English artist, he had an itinerant and bohemian childhood. He attended various schools in France, England, and the United States, receiving his B.A. (1938) and his M.A. (1939) from Columbia University. During his years of teaching English at Columbia University and at St. Bonaventure University he endured a spiritual crisis that led to his profound conversion from atheist to Roman Catholic. In 1949 he entered the Trappist, or Cistercian, monastery and was ordained Father M. Louis that same year. Merton served as master of scholastics and later as master of novices.

Most of his writing dates from these years. To one of his many correspondents he suggested that his writing can be divided into

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three periods: from 1938 to his ordination in 1949, “when I suddenly got to be well known, a best seller, etc.”; a middle period lasting “until somewhere in the early sixties,” ending with “*Disputed Questions*,” in which he wrote as an apologist for the revitalized Church; after which he, “opened up again to the world,” with works like *Wisdom of the Desert*, *Conjectures of a Guilty By-Stander*, and *Chuang Tzu*. The Syracuse holdings come from this last period, in which Merton believed he was “evolving further with studies on Zen and a new kind of experimental creative drive in prose, poetry, and satire.”

Merton wrote several popular books for New Directions, Harcourt Brace, and Farrar Straus and numerous articles for such publications as *Commonweal*, *Blackfriars*, *Catholic Worker*, *Harpers*, *Saturday Review*, and the *Sewanee Review*. The range of journals and presses publishing his work is an indication of his scope, accessibility, and seriousness.

Among the Merton Papers (1960–68) at Syracuse there is a small batch of outgoing correspondence, most of which should be considered “open letters,” which he prepared for general circulation because he received many similar requests for advice or information on spiritual, personal, and even political issues. There are transcriptions of interviews, reproductions of some of his art work, several published essays, prefaces for books, and other printed writings. Of special interest are ten spiral notebooks, simple school copybooks, which contain handwritten notes from his readings of Simone Weil, Rainer Maria Rilke, Meister Eckhart, Marshall McLuhan, Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka, William Faulkner, and others. He also jotted reminders of special projects, drafts of poetry, and other items. The combination of published essays and letters, along with the notebooks from the same period, yields rewarding insights into Merton’s eclectic and energetic mind. He tends to go all over the territory of Western culture to make his points. The notebooks show the sources of his ideas and the range of his interests.

Among the published essays is an offprint from *The Lugano Review* entitled “The Zen Koan.”<sup>1</sup> In it Merton reviews two books,

1. Thomas Merton, “The Zen Koan,” *The Lugano Review*, vol. 1/5–6 (1966), 127–8.

*The Three Pillars of Zen* by Phillip Kapleau, and *The Zen Koan* by Isshu Miura and Ruth Fuller Sesaki. He seeks a fundamental ground of insight common to both Christians and Buddhists, while explaining a concept, the koan, that has a vague and slippery reputation in the West. A famous example is Hakuin Ekaku Zenji's "If you know the sound of two hands clapping, show me the sound of one hand clapping." Merton writes:

The Zen experience is first of all a liberation from the notion of "I" and of "mind", yet is not annihilation and pure unconsciousness (as Westerners sometimes imagine "Nirvana" to be). It is on the contrary a kind of super-consciousness in which one experiences reality not indirectly or mediately, but directly and in which, clinging to no experience and to no awareness as such, one is simply "aware". This simple "awareness" or "awakeness" is in fact the true identity which the Zen student seeks and for which he so to speak immolates his superficial empirical consciousness, his ego-identity, by means of the Koan. In the book on the Zen Koan we find in fact that certain types of Koan are considered appropriate for different steps of this deepening. Hence, it would be superficial to suppose that Zen study ends when one has attained a first satori, "enlightenment" (kensho). Enlightenment in this sense of a new identity and awareness is not the end but the serious beginning. (127)

The practice of Zen aims at the deepening, purification and transformation of the consciousness. But it does not rest satisfied with any "deepening" or a superficial "purification". It seeks the most radical transformation: it works on depths that would seem to go beyond even depth psychology. It has, in other words, a metaphysical and spiritual dimension. (128)

Contrasting these thoughts with Western philosophies of life, Merton adds:

Such is the project which the Western mind instinctively

sets itself in life. A man sets his mind on something, he uses his will and energy to get it, and when he has it he keeps it, enjoys it, rests in it, if necessary protects it. Happiness consists in the full conscious certitude that he has in fact attained what he sought, that it is and remains his possession. But the basic tenet of Buddhism is that an identity built on this kind of consciousness is false. (129)

To show that this external self-affirmation leads to a metaphysical conflict that is fundamental, he draws on St. John of the Cross, Rilke, and even cave art. He quotes St. John: "The darkness which the soul here describes relates, as we have said, to the desires and faculties, sensual, interior and spiritual, for all these are darkened in this night as to their natural light, so that being purged . . . they may be illumined" (131). Later he quotes from Rilke's Eighth Duino Elegy: "Always facing creation, we perceive there / only a mirror-ing of the free and open / dimmed by our breath." Rilke presses the point further:

And we, spectators, always, everywhere,  
looking at, *never out* of, everything!  
It fills us. We arrange it. It collapses.  
We rearrange it, and collapse ourselves. (132)<sup>2</sup>

"This," Merton says, "throws an admirable light on the 'pure consciousness' of Zen, the consciousness that has not fallen into self-consciousness, separateness and spectatorship" (133).

To explain "seeing" directly and intimately, rather than as a spectator, he turns to cave art:

The extraordinary vitality of cave art springs from the realization of seeing. Cave art does not tell us merely what a bison looks like (there is all the difference in the world between a cave painting and a photograph). This is not the bison of the zoologist, nor is it simply the bison of a supposed (and utterly non-existent) self-conscious paleolithic man who dwells on the fact that he likes meat. Cave art neither represents the object, nor expresses the reaction of

2. St. John and Rilke quoted in Merton, "The Zen Koan."



the subject: it celebrates the *act of seeing* as a holy and transcendent discovery. (135)

Merton is suggesting that this is the effect koan training has on the Zen student, providing a means to transcend the ordinary duality or “us” separate from “them” within which our everyday minds function.

At one point, as he is reflecting on Rilke’s poems, he says: “This unusual ability to yield himself to the object and submit to its ontological and poetic splendor made Rilke very vulnerable.” By turning to the notebook for 1965–66 (some of which is in French, since he used both languages with equal facility) we find on the first page: “Because of his [Rilke’s] own extraordinary capacity for ‘in-seeing’, for divining the heart of being, he felt extremely vulnerable to others, easily confounded by love—and probably also by a knowledge of his own relative incapacity to really respond and really *give* love.” Here we see an author taking his own speculations on another writer’s emotional life and extending them into a larger understanding of Rilke and his relevance to our understanding of the dark nights of our own souls, our separateness from one another. Without the notebooks, this link, this jump of intuition by Merton, would be lost.

These elements (Rilke, St. John, cave art) are all marshaled to explain the inexplicable. It must be remembered that Merton takes on any topic with equally broad enthusiasm. Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism in particular, are often misunderstood in the West. Witness how Pope John Paul II says in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*:<sup>3</sup> “The ‘enlightenment’ experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad, that it is the source of evil and of suffering for man. . . . To save oneself means, above all, to free oneself from evil by becoming indifferent to the world, which is the source of evil.”<sup>4</sup> Merton not only clarifies the issues; he places them into significant relation to Christianity and especially the contemplative tradition:

3. Published by Knopf in 1994.

4. Quoted in Donald S. Lopez Jr., “Is the Pope Catholic?” *Tricycle* 4 (Summer, 1995).

The final awakening of Zen consciousness is not simply a loss of self, but the finding and gift of self in and through all. . . . The importance of this Zen intuition of reality is, in my opinion as a Catholic, its metaphysical honesty. It refuses to make a claim to any special revelation or to a mystical light, and yet if it is followed on, in line with its own vast and open perspectives, it is certainly compatible with a revelation of inscrutable freedom, love and grace.<sup>5</sup>

We come away from writing such as this informed, invigorated, and with a glimpse of a sensibility that runs deeper than dogma.

5. Merton, "The Zen Koan," 139.