

THOMAS MERTON

Most people have read at least one of the books from the facile pen of Thomas Merton. All his readers know that Father Merton is a monastic contemplative known now as Father Louis of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, commonly called the Trappists. But unless his readers have read "the great spiritual odyssey", **The Seven Storey Mountain**, they may be unaware of the cosmopolitan life this man led before he was received into the Catholic Church. In a short time he made the transition from the life of a pagan intellectual, a life which was at least amoral, to one wholly occupied with God, the ascetical life of the Christian contemplative. Our age is full of strange contradictions.

It is interesting to sketch the highlights in the life of this man who is an important figure in the Catholic Church in America today. Before he became a Trappist, he was familiar with France, Italy, England, and America. Now, in the seclusion of a Cistercian monastery, his horizons are, if anything, broader. No longer an active member of modern society, he has time to observe and understand it. The seeds gathered in the quiet of the Cistercian monastery in Kentucky, have been strewn to a world hungry for this reality, but prevented from finding it because of the "troubling about many things."

He was born in 1915 in a small town in the Pyrenees in southern France, and travelled with his family to a variety of climes. He lived in Bermuda, in Paris, in England, and in the West Indies. Both his parents were artists; his father was also a British consul. His mother, who died when he was a child, was a cultured American woman. He was educated in the Lycee of Montauban and became filled with the Catholic culture of the Middle Ages. It is true that his father shared his interest, but at this time both confined themselves only to the cultural aspects of Catholicism. His father died an Anglican, but Thomas got the grace to see the sterility and inefficacy of Anglicanism, its lack of vital contact with the Mystical Body the True Church, and he became a convert. After leaving France he went to England to continue his schooling at Oakham where he received a general English education in the classics and did some work in French and German literature.

Before rejoining his grandparents and brother in America, he travelled in Italy and learned Italian. The final stage of his studies was completed at Columbia University in Manhattan, N. Y. where he took all the literary honours. His poems reflected a long journeying, not only through several countries, but through many stages of the spirit. In writing his thesis on "Nature and Art in William Blake" he became acquainted with Jacques Maritain's **Art and Scholasticism**. As a result of his study of the Catholic philosophy of St. Thomas, and of Catholic literature, particularly the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, he applied to Father Ford for instructions in the Faith. This great gift was given him, and he was baptized in November, 1938.

After he obtained his M.A. degree, he taught at Columbia extension for one year, and during this time he began writing book reviews for the "Tribune" and "The Times". The next fall, (1940) he went from the graduate school at Columbia to teach at St. Bonaventure's College and Seminary and found that the life gave him a love of seclusion. Merton was now debating within himself whether he should go to Europe and become a Carthusian,

enter Gethsemane Abbey, or join Baroness de Hueck Doherty at Friendship House in New York, as he was interested in ministering to the underprivileged Negroes in Harlem. In an effort to settle the crucially important problem of finding out God's Will, he made a retreat at Our Lady of Gethsemane. He gradually formed his estimate of modern life and his place in it, and knew he could find right there, the solitude he craved and time to give to God, undisturbed by radios, T.V., and the manifold distractions of everyday life in the world. In 1941 he shook the dust of the world from his feet and entered the Cistercian abbey in Gethsemane, Kentucky. He had caught the idea that the monastery is a school in which we learn from God how to be happy. He made his first profession as a Trappist on the Feast of St. Joseph, 1943, and took his final vows in 1947. Although he loved Gethsemane, it took a long battle with himself to make him want to stay. Some have enjoyed speculating on his vocation, but in his book, **No Man Is an Island**, he makes a forthright statement on his own vocation.

While studying for the priesthood, he had the joy of seeing his brother converted before going overseas with the R.C.A.F. This must have been a great consolation to him when he learned shortly afterwards that his brother had lost his life in the North Sea.

Father Merton continues to write both prose and poetry. His aim is to share with his readers his own reflections on different aspects of the spiritual life without which there is no reality. He has a very deep and sure grasp of the basic verities on which the spiritual life depends. In his various books he exhorts everyone to practice active contemplation, by making Christ the center of one's life and by having all activities depend on His Way and Will. His life steeped in the Liturgy, close to the soil, wrapped in silence and peace, and liberated by penance from most of the obstacles that cloud the poet's vision, has contributed immensely to his literary form, and has made him what he is.

—SISTER MARGARET MARIE, '58

INTRODUCTION TO THE FINE ARTS

The proverbial assertion that the best things in life are free is as true today as it ever was. We, being exposed in varying degrees to what is termed "liberal education", should at least be able to recognize if not to appreciate this fact with respect to the Arts, so often referred to as the "finer things of life". There are so many fine things in nature (and, therefore, in art) that we cannot hope to enjoy them all. But through the media of the fine arts we can communicate feelings, thoughts, and emotions, otherwise uncommunicable. Each art is distinct in that it can impart a sense of beauty through the objects of its own creation. For art is nothing more than the projection of the shadow of humanity.

Art arises out of one basic human quality, which we all recognize—the need for beauty and expression of it. That is, we all strive to give our impressions form and meaning. A person can know and feel tremendous realities, but he is not complete as a human until he has achieved a means of expression whereby he can communicate these to others. The spiritual workings of man know no particular language. Their message is universal because man, in view of his final end, is universal. Art is

simply man's attempt to express what he thinks and feels by use of a creative agent.

Many attempts have been made to explain the nature of art. But it is often called a representation or outline of something appealing, whereas it is really the interpretation of such. We might even say that art begins when the artist departs from strict imitation of nature. Nature is the artist's inexhaustible source of inspiration; but the laws which govern the work of art are wholly independent from the laws of nature. Hence Beethoven, in creating his sublime "Pastoral Symphony" was deeply awakened by the emanations of nature, but he created his own impressions of it in the form of music.

In art we ask that the object of creation instruct us (enlighten our intellect) or that it delight us (stimulate our sense capacities). Culminating from both is the development of taste. This is one thing that an appreciation of art will do for us all—it develops a sense of taste in us. Good taste is the fine flower of culture, and like a flower must be cultivated in order to evolve and produce artistic qualities and a sense of proportion in the individual. By acquiring taste in things, each person is enabled to answer for himself the question of what beauty is, and what it means to him.

In aesthetics, a distinction is usually made between the Fine Arts and the Arts of Utility. The Fine Arts serve no ulterior purpose, and their products are valued in themselves. It is a case of "art for art's sake". The Arts of Utility, however, have in view the uses which its artifacts serve. Some artistic productions may, however, serve a use as for example: a Greek vase. The Fine Arts tend to aesthetic values, and are therefore concerned with the attainment of what is beautiful. There are many media of expression when it comes to art. So in the Fine Arts we speak of all forms as being a static art (architecture, sculpture, and painting) or a dynamic art (music, poetry, and drama). It is true that the static arts bring us beauty in a high degree of concreteness through color, form, and texture; but the dynamic arts bring us in closer association with life through the common element of movement. Hence we can, almost see personality in action in a fast-moving piece of music or in a lilting sonnet of resonant poetry. This is accomplished through the diverse capacity of rhythm, which in itself is satisfying and beautiful.

Today we are inclined to label the arts (more specifically the Fine Arts) as "culture". But the terms are not synonymous. Culture is the effect of many sources of refinement by which a man may know and appreciate many of the finer things, both artistic and non-artistic. To be artistic is to have style; and to have a sense of style one must have taste. This presupposes a knowledge and appreciation of what a specific form of art should be. Therefore, arising out of the expediencies of art there are two basic approaches made—the appreciative, and the critical. Since most of us behold works of art with untrained eyes and inattentive ears, we would concern ourselves (if at all) with the appreciative approach to art.

When we talk about art, we unassumingly ask, "What will it do for us?" The answer—it will make us saner people, and will, in a tangible way, alert us to the great realities of life. The essence of beauty is order. Therefore we can have beauty in our lives by having

order in our lives. Man, by virtue of his free will to act in many different ways, is, in a certain sense, an artist. Man, then, is the architect of his own destiny—he inflicts his own penalties, and selects his own rewards.

It is hoped that each of the fine arts, which are the main gateways to culture, will be presented to students, and will be treated separately in subsequent issues of the **Red and White** as part of the cultural program here at college.

—EDITORIAL

ISLAND IN THE SUN

The rolling swells of the huge expansive South Pacific heaved aimlessly. For five days now amidst the vastness of this desolate ocean, a small raft drifted. Prostrate on this raft lay a man. Through cool, chilling nights and hot, searing days, the small mass of coarse water-soaked logs had been his home. For three days his spirit and strength had endured. The glaring sun, brilliantly reflected from the sea around him had bothered him little. He was lonely perhaps, but not yet desperate. Three days fresh water had moistened his lips and throat. Three days food had filled his stomach. But it was now more than fifty hours since he had tasted of food or fresh water. He had taken small mouthfuls of salt water every few hours. It had kept him alive, but it had only aggravated his thirst and cracked even more his already sun-burned lips.

Weakness was getting the better of him. The emptiness and endlessness of his surroundings had etched loneliness into his mind. It drove despair into every part of him.

Sometimes his groping hand would scrape aimlessly below the water line of the raft and emerge slowly, draped in a green slime of plankton. The hand would move to his mouth and for two days this was his nourishment.

Early in the fifth day an increasing pitch in the ocean swell suddenly swept a wave of nausea through his blistered body. It brought him to a dull consciousness only to make him retch futilely against the salt caked, crevassed wood. But now sound was hammering at his deadened senses. Muffled crashing throbbed heavily in his head and slowly faded. Then repeated in increasing frequency until it came, over a period of hours, at regular intervals.

Crashing through the surf, the loosely tied timbers moved closer to the sandy shore line. Each succeeding breaker moved craft and occupant closer to dry land. The surf would recede with a shrouded whisper then rush forward again, strengthened by the might of a new wave. Each new wave pushed all before it, until they finally rested in a scattered line close to where tropical vegetation met sunbleached, glistening sand.

He had lived on his island for four days now. Strength was returning to his cruelly burned and undernourished body and logical thoughts were pushing the terror of his earlier despair, deep into his sub-consciousness.

It was nine days since his ordeal had first begun. On the ninth day, as usual, the morning light came suddenly, forewarned only by minutes of fiery hues in the eastern sky. Then the sun burst over the horizon, a golden red ball of flame. Gazing eastward he watched the sun, and