# Chapter One

# Early Life

Thomas Merton spent the first twenty years of life tossed about in a sea of conflicting influences. He was born in Prades, France, in 1915, just a few hundred miles away from the killing fields of World War I and grew up in the shadows of international conflict, domestic tragedy, and radical social instability. His parents were both artists who had met in 1911 while studying at the Academy of Percyval Tudor-Hart in Paris. His father, Owen Merton, a devotee of Cézanne, was born in New Zealand, and his mother, Ruth Calvert Jenkins, a student of dance and interior design, was born in New York.

Yet despite his father's fascination with Cubism and his mother's interest in the emerging new design movement, neither of them ever came into contact with any of the giants of Parisian modernism. Merton described his parents as "possessing the integrity of artists—an integrity that lifted them above the level of the world without delivering them from it."[1] They were, to his mind, tragic figures who, like many of their generation, sought in art what they could not find in life: occasions and objects worthy of adoration.

Before the armies began to scatter bodies and shells over the French countryside, Merton's family moved to Long Island to be closer to his mother's parents. It was there that his only brother John Paul was born in 1918, and there that his mother died of stomach cancer three years later.

Merton was only six years old at the time of his mother's death, and the loss haunted him for the rest of his life. Not only did the loss inflict emotional turmoil and inconsolable loneliness upon him, it left him to be raised by an itinerant father who spent a great deal of time traveling the world trying to get his painting career off the ground. Consequently, as a child Merton never really had a home. He was constantly being shuttled back and forth from wherever his father happened to be living to his grandparents' home on Long Island.

This arrangement, however, did have its advantages. Besides providing Merton with an international education and fluency in two languages, it also allowed him to develop an intimate relationship with his grandfather, Samuel (Pop) Jenkins. In contrast to his father, Pop was an American self-made man who had started out as a newspaper boy and through sheer hard work had become a successful sheet-music salesman. "Pop" invented a picture book using stills from movies to tell stories, and it made him a small fortune—part of which eventually paid for Merton's education.

In 1925, when Merton was ten years old, he moved back to France with his father and enrolled in the Lycee Ingres at Montauban. Merton's younger Brother, John Paul, stayed behind with the Jenkins's. Although John Paul visited Merton during the summers, the absence and the distance hurt their relationship. Merton felt an older brother's sense of responsibility for this loss of connection, along with an older brother's feelings of utter helplessness at ever being able to heal it.

Years later, when John Paul died in World War II, Merton expressed his anguish in one of the most moving poems he ever composed. But in 1925, he took the separation stoically, and though he felt isolated and alone at the Lycee, he was inspired by French delicacy, grace, intelligence, and taste—things he hadn't really known in Pop's house where the emphasis had been upon movie stars, success, and the family's new affluence.

It didn't take the young Merton long, however, to notice the cynicism of the boys at the Lycee. They seemed, he tells us in his autobiography, bent upon "transforming their intelligence into sophistry; and their dignity and refinement into petty

vanity and theatrical self-display."[2] Of course, he mentions all this in retrospect. A boy of ten, even one as precocious as he, could not have been able to formulate such criticism consciously. Yet it is clear that he felt the sting of the pseudo-sophistication of the French bourgeoisie at a very tender age, and it left its mark. It drove him into a literary underground of sorts populated by friends in the lower grades who had taken it upon themselves to compose long and complicated epic adventure novels in the tradition of Jules Verne. These kids, Merton tells us, "still had ideals and ambitions," and so he joined them, finding in writing an escape from the pressures and pretensions of the world around him.

Three years later, Merton's father moved to England to be closer to the London art scene, and Merton found himself enrolled in Ripley Court School in Surrey. The understated expectation for excellence in the British public schools suited him far more than the arrogance of Mountauban, and he blossomed as a student. He graduated to Oakham Public School a year later and stayed there until his admission to Cambridge University in the fall of 1933.

It somehow seems fitting that Merton was part of the generation who came of age in England between the two great wars. The British Empire may have been outwardly declining, but inwardly it was gathering strength for its final stand against the emerging totalitarian plague. To enter manhood at such a time and place was to be confronted by great issues and much social strife, and yet to know in one's bones that nonchalant heroic resolve was the sine qua non of adult life.

Two years after entering Oakham, Merton's father died of a brain tumor leaving him virtually alone in the world. Grandfather Jenkins and John Paul were an ocean away. And although they still sometimes visited him during the summers and Pop continued to provide him with financial assistance, Merton began to lose his sense of purpose and direction. He did well enough as a student to be admitted into Cambridge, but he was beginning to acquire a reputation as a rebel and self-styled outsider. He began to smoke a pipe, wear turtleneck sweaters, and listen to hot jazz recordings rather than to the swing records the other students liked.[3] And

although he talked about a career in the diplomatic corps, his actual aspirations were far less admirable.

"I was not really content at Oakham at all," he later wrote, "but only wanted to get my scholarship to Cambridge and get away. And what I would do then, was go looking for a girl and . . happiness. And the way to find a fine girl was to go where the fine girls were: and as I knew from movies and novels, the really pretty girls, the gay and witty graceful ones who dressed well and were really beautiful, were in theaters and nightclubs and big dances. And at Clubs and Hotels on the Rivera, and in cities and everywhere where life was itself fine and gay and beautiful and full of light and richness and gaiety. Because fine things all go together, and if I were there where beautiful things like newly decorated modernist bars, and places where there was good music, there I would find beautiful women."[4]

Merton entered Clare College, Cambridge, in the fall, but his first and only year there was an unmitigated disaster. Although the facts are sketchy, it seems that among his many indiscretions that year, he fathered a child out of wedlock, participated as the victim in a mock crucifixion at a drunken fraternity party, lost a goodly portion of his academic scholarship, and generally made a mess of his young life.

He retreated to New York and entered Columbia University in January 1935. It was not an auspicious return. When Merton got back to the United States, freed from his European entanglements, he was morally lost. Like many of the college students of his era, his primary enthusiasms were avant-garde literature, sex, alcohol, and notoriety. He looked to radical politics for direction, and during his first year at Columbia he joined the Communist Party, protesting the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, taking the "Oxford Pledge" and participating in rallies, shouting such slogans as "Books, not Battleships! No more War!" He even had his own party name: "Frank Swift."[5]

But Merton was not a very dedicated communist. He attended only one meeting, which he found insufferably boring. Later he admitted that his interest in politics had less to do with any sense of social responsibility than with his own

personal search for meaning. "The thing that made Communism seem so plausible to me, was my own lack of logic which failed to distinguish between the reality of the evils which Communism was trying to overcome and the validity of its diagnosis and chosen cure. For there can be no doubt that modern society is in a terrible condition, and that its wars and depressions and its slums and all its other evils are principally the fruits of an unjust social system, a system that must be reformed and purified or else replaced. However, if you are wrong does that make me right? If you are bad, does that prove that I am good?"[6]

This is a telling repudiation because it points to Merton's early recognition of a basic psychological flaw in vulgar appropriations of Marx and Freud. There is a vast difference between exposing a fraud and defending a value. The ideas of Marx had appealed to Merton precisely because they served his youthful need for self-justification. Marxism offered a way to repudiate an obviously flawed social order without having to acknowledge any particular moral flaws in himself, and so it played into his own rootless egotism by exempting him from any rigorous examination of conscience.

Fortunately there were several critics of modern culture at Columbia who tempered Merton's facile political theorizing and exposed the self-serving premises behind his pseudo-revolt. Most notable among these were Joseph Wood Krutch, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, and Mark Van Doren. Van Doren had a particularly powerful impact upon Merton. His love of literature as a way of making sense of the world, as a virtue of the practical intellect and not simply a vague spilling of emotions, inspired Merton to direct his considerable intellectual energies toward a literary career and unknowingly prepared the way for Merton's eventual religious conversion.

Van Doren, Merton observed, looked for the quiddities of things, and sought being and substance under the cover of accident and appearance. This protoscholasticism served as a counterpoint to Merton's own fascination with dialectics. "It was a very good thing that I ran into someone like Mark Van Doren at that particular time because in my new reverence for Communism, I was in danger of docilely accepting any

kind of stupidity, provided I thought it was something that paved the way to the Elysian fields of classless society."[7]

Merton quickly became disillusioned with what he called "the radical mystique," but he never lost his conviction that extreme measures were needed to meet the crises of the age. He had just become convinced that those measures had to be personal and symbolic ones. The so-called activists were actually making things worse by accentuating the very features of modernity most in need of reform: its penchant for shrill, reductive explanations of complex social phenomena and its fascination with change for change's sake.

It is difficult to over estimate the impact Columbia had on Merton. He began to read in a new, more Emersonian fashion, directly linking books to life. Van Doren had taught him that by age eighteen or nineteen one finally has had enough experiences to read literature profitably.[8] Merton was being invited to shed the veneer of his European sophistication and become an "American Scholar"—someone who "resisted the vulgar prosperity that retrogrades ever to barbarism, by preserving and communicating heroic sentiments, noble biographies, melodious verse, and the conclusions of history."[9]

Inspired, Merton threw himself into his writing and into his studies—becoming the editor of the yearbook, a member of all the literary clubs, an athlete on the track team, and a brother of the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity. As he entered his senior year at Columbia in 1937, although he didn't know it at the time, both he and the world were on the verge of profound transformations.

The thirties had been a time when things seemed to dart back and forth in a hundred different directions. Democratic societies came under fire for lack of resolve, and the flaws of Capitalism were exposed by its stark failures of distribution. The rise of the industrial state, rather than leading to an era of abundance, seemed to have actually disenfranchised the common man, creating unemployment and making possible terrible new forms of warfare. The decade had opened with the stock market crash, the Great Depression, Hitler's ascension to the chancellorship of Germany. And it was ending with the Nazis invading Poland.

Thomas Merton was becoming a "man thinking" at the very moment that European culture was reaching its philosophical nadir. Outside forces were now dictating the terms of individual existence to a degree hitherto unimaginable, and the relationship between ends and means, between life and production, indeed, between subject and object, were rapidly becoming inverted and debased. If Hegel was right, and the life of the mind only attains its truth when discovering itself in absolute desolation, then Merton could not have picked a better time to embark upon his journey of self-discovery.