

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FIFTY-SIX

Louis A. Ruprecht Jr.

An Elemental Life

Mystery and Mercy in the Work of
Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO
(1915–2011)

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*This book is dedicated to my friend,
and Matthew's fellow-traveler,
Michael Bever*

Now we have our brief moment here,
We came yesterday, are here today, will be gone tomorrow.
Let that brief moment be spent in communion
with the whole of life
so that we will not have lived in vain.

Father Matthew Kelty, OCSO

As a child I used often to go sit in the woods on the little hill back of the house. . . . And I remember consciously thinking, and I must have done so many times, that the world was very beautiful, but that people were not. I felt the world would have been so fine a place without them. I sometimes feel now that I was onto a truth, though I was yet to learn that I was people.

Matthew Kelty, "Flute Solo," in *My Song is of Mercy*, 52

Contact with elemental forces has a way of reducing life to fundamental questions. The sea, the mountains, the desert, the wilderness, have all been from ancient times the testing place of the spirit.

Matthew Kelty, "The Psalms as Prayer,"
from *Sermons in a Monastery*, 10

Life is not one-sided. It is ambivalent. . . . There is a kind of elemental dialogue that seems to be deep in the nature of all reality. It is a dialogue which implies not merely a meeting, but a meeting in which the truth emerges not from one dominating the other but from each meeting the other in love and communing, avoiding mere submergence and disappearance into the other, or forcing the partner to disappear into one's own being. There is a sense in which we must hold our ground and insist on the genuineness of what we are, but it is an insistence that takes into account the other's right also to be what he is. It is in the meeting that the whole truth is born.

Matthew Kelty, "Our Last Christmas with Dom James,"
from *Sermons in a Monastery*, 84

Monks see things the rest of us don't; they see visions from the supernatural world. They refine their spirit through solitude and reflection and restraint. We blunt ours through social contact, lack of reflection, and indulgence. And so they perceive things we ourselves are unable to. When someone is alone in a quiet room he can easily hear the clock ticking. If others enter, however, with the usual chatter and commotion, he no longer hears it. But the ticking is still there to be heard.

Constantine Cavafy, "Clearing the Ground"

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Dedication

It has been raining steadily for almost 36 hours. This morning toward the end of my meditation the rain was pouring down on the roof of the hermitage with great force and the woods resounded with tons of water falling out of the sky. It was great! A good beginning for a New Year. Yesterday in a lull I was looking across the valley at black wet hills, sharply outlined against the woods, and white patches of water everywhere in the bottoms: a landscape well etched by serious weather.

Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, 3



I traveled to the Abbey of Gethsemani on Valentine's Day in 2013. It was a strangely disorienting trip, in the beginning. The daffodils that normally begin blooming in Atlanta at precisely that time had come three weeks early—as had the cherry blossoms in Washington, DC, well in advance of the festival organized each March to celebrate their evanescent beauty.

By contrast, when I landed in Louisville, KY, it had already begun to snow. By the time I arranged my rental car and got underway, it was snowing hard and sticking to the road. The back roads, sided by barren tracks of fallow and frozen farmland, made for hard, slow going. I arrived in tar-pitch darkness; the darkened church and tower loomed mute in a clouded, moonless sky. Supper had been served and cleared, and the long monastic silence that begins at 8:00 p.m. each evening was begun. An obviously weary staff took me to my room,

made sure I was settled, then retreated into the shadows and the silence and sleep. It was an ominous experience, the power of such silence. This, as I began to understand, is central to the power of such monastic place.

I repeated my paces, returning to the closest small town not far from the abbey and looked for a place to eat. Forgetting that it was Valentine's Eve, I walked into a fairly ramshackle saloon with a very old wooden bar and streaky mirror running the length of the lounge. It was a hardscrabble bar, with a low-key restaurant attached, testifying to the hard lives farmers lead in these relative backwaters. Valentine's Eve or no, I was overdressed—having gone straight to the airport from work—and stood out sorely among the couples and groups of friends all waiting for their tables to clear. Reservations ran late that night, and I would need to wait to eat. I dutifully sat at the bar, immediately noticed an impressive collection of local bourbons against the glass, sampled several.

And, much to my surprise, I talked. The locals could not have been more friendly and engaging, curious as to who I was, what I was doing there, where I'd come from. The mention of Atlanta turned the conversation immediately to politics, and it was made abundantly clear to me that I was in a very red part of a very red state. We disagreed about many things (not all), but with a cordiality and spirited friendliness that disarmed and delighted. When asked where I was staying, I mentioned the monastery; they all knew of it, but none had visited—just five miles up the road. Called into the dining room, the group with whom I'd been chatting invited me to come back the next night for more conversation, and clearly meant it, paying my bar bill before they left.

I was seated late, finished last, and only vaguely recall the dazzling ice-journey back to Gethsemani. It was a strange and surreal taste of the place I'd first known primarily as the location of Thomas Merton's hermitage and retreat, home to his wide-ranging spiritual exercises. It took some time before I would learn that Merton's experience of the area had been not

so very different from my own. And so the close attention to place, to surroundings both natural and cultural, will be one recurrent theme in what follows here.

The next morning dawned bright and crystalline, with early morning sunlight seeming to shimmer on the frozen hillside. I grabbed a coffee, then crunched around the grounds of the monastery for a while, waiting for the day to warm. My first glimpse of Merton's grave, so eloquent in its simplicity and proximity to the retreat house and refectory, was gratifying, though the morning turned rapidly warmer and the snowscape turned to slush as I lingered. I opted to take a drive around this storied natural landscape since by then the roads were already clear and very nearly dry.

It was while I was on the road that my dear friend, Michael Bever, called to inform me that his driveway had just been cleared and that he would arrive at Gethsemani in several hours. He had first suggested this visit, and he had made all the arrangements, so to be there without him made hermitage seem orphanage for the time being. The first glimpse of Mike descending from his car confirmed that the trip, so difficult initially, would be auspicious. And it was.

We spent significant time walking the grounds together, and thanks to Brother Paul Quenon, we were taken on a tour of Merton's hermitage. As is his wont ("playing Merton roulette," he calls it, only half in jest), Brother Paul retrieved one of Merton's published journals that are kept there, turning to the date from that year. He read gracefully, and I was enthralled by a long serendipitous description of a hawk descending to kill a bird, then devouring it just outside of Merton's window where I was then seated at his desk, listening. The ensuing meditation on the circle of life that followed has stayed with me to this day. Merton's writing, at times almost scandalous in its intimacy and self-revelation, does that to you: it invites you into friendship, with the promise of greater intimacy to come. Whether it does come, you realize only gradually, is up to you, and depends on what you give.

Mike and I spent as much time away from the abbey as on the grounds. We sampled excellent bourbons in several nearby towns. We heard some wonderful music, enjoyed some superb food, had some hilarious further exchanges with our nearer barside neighbors. This all replicated my first day, but deepened and improved upon it. With Mike, the place was a very different kind of place; it still is. Over several days, we mapped out the vague outline of a book devoted to Father Matthew Kelty; we both agreed that it could not be a book about Thomas Merton, large as his presence looms, still, at Gethsemani and elsewhere.

Matthew and Merton were decidedly different people, but this much they shared: they both created an atmospherics of intimacy that seem to belie the normal expectations of monastic life. What Merton did in print, Matthew did in person. Matthew's homilies, at times almost scandalous in their intimacy and self-revelation, invite you into friendship, and the promise of greater intimacy to come. Whether it does come, you realize only gradually, is up to you; this, too, depends on what you give.

Mike gave a great deal to his friendship and love for Father Matthew. He would often drive three hours each way from his home in Mount Carmel, just to see and hear Matthew at the Mass. Matthew sang the Mass in the old Latin style, which he loved, and he would serve anybody; his was an open table. That is all of a piece with his convictions about universal salvation, and his openness to all varieties of religious expression. (Father Matthew once preached to a room full of bishops, Mike tells me, suggesting to his assembled guests that "hell, even Vodou is better than nothing!" I can imagine the twinkle in his eye as he said so.)

For Matthew Kelty, continuing—which is a far cry from finishing—the work of Thomas Merton was informed in large measure by "all that eastern stuff" (the Taoism, the Zen Buddhism, the Sufism, the poetry of all kinds) . . . his own demurals notwithstanding. Matthew claimed not to know Zen at all

("that was Merton's thing"), but Mike assures me that he did. Even a casual conversation with Matthew made that clear—his elusive wisdom-style, his remarkable spiritual discernment, and his eye for the essential natural detail. Matthew also read a great deal of poetry, as a way of setting the tone when he preached, and the interplay of his impish informality with his rhetorical intensity and spiritual luminescence could be equally affecting. He was a mesmerizing speaker. He brought gifts to his table—the poetry, the preaching, his own quiet embodiment of the Gospel—and if you didn't want it, or didn't understand it, or didn't feel ready for it, that did not appear to bother him much. I am not a Catholic myself, though more than a decade at the Vatican Library and its Secret Archives, and several trips to the Abbey of Gethsemani, have left me with strong and lasting impressions. I think of what I am doing here as an ethnography of monastic life as much as it is an appreciation of Father Matthew's spiritual legacy.

Up to now, I have been describing my second visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani; by then Father Matthew had gone to eternity, as they say here. The first time I visited the abbey, Mike arranged for me to meet with Father Matthew. The visit was not long, scarcely an hour, but it went deep—which does not surprise. Matthew began with several stories about Thomas Merton, in case that was what I wanted to hear. When it became clear that I was as interested in his present as I was in Merton's past, then Father Matthew spoke quietly and candidly of his own life as a monk and a person of aspiring faith and spiritual discernment.

I was deeply moved by the encounter, and I did what academics in such situations tend to do: I sent him a copy of my first book. Father Matthew sent me a lovely note not long thereafter, suggesting (as I would hear and read many times subsequently) that he was no scholar, and that such things as Hegel and Nietzsche were well beyond his limited capacities. But then he commented, almost casually, about one of the appendices in which the central point of the book was summarized

in a more concrete way—and so it was clear that he had understood everything I had done, or at least had tried to do. That he was a scholar, and a man gifted with a remarkably supple intellect, is one of the central convictions that has led me to write this book. That he is a spiritual writer worthy of discussion together with his more famous contemporary, Thomas Merton, is another.

Mike gave far more to his encounters with Father Matthew than I. As I have already said, he came to Gethsemani countless times, simply to hear Matthew preach and to see him officiate . . . and then later, to interview him on camera for a marvelous experimental film he entitled *This Lone Brightness*, a film that Mike has now made available for anyone on his website, “Sunyata Sandwich.” That film is Mike’s poetic testament to Father Matthew, born of his gradual realization as to the depth of Matthew’s life and legacy. In the course of their deepening bond, Mike elected to join the Roman Church.

This book is, or at least it aspires to be, a prose poetic counterpoint to Mike’s cinematic testimonial. It will not match the beauty, nor the freshness and vitality, of what Mike produced. But this book is similarly dedicated to Mike’s vision and impressions. That Mike is a scholar, and a man gifted with a remarkably supple intellect, is another one of the central facts that gave birth to this book. I have lost track of how many books, authors, and films Mike has brought to my attention over the years—Merton, Matthew, Nishida, Nishitani, Hafez, Rumi, and so many more—but I have not lost track of how much they each have contributed to me. That Mike is a spiritual poet equal in stature to his dear friend and fellow traveler is what inspires this dedication.

This book, then, is for Mike.

LAR
The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani
September 2017

Preface

The elemental solitude of the person is forever. We are, as God is. We are immortal, as God is. We are unique, as God is. Granted our being, our immortality, our uniqueness are limited, they are genuine dimensions of the human.

Matthew Kelty, "A Bonding Beauteous,"
from *Singing for the Kingdom*, 16



During his three-year tenure at a small experimental monastic community in Oxford, North Carolina, Father Matthew Kelty was invited to speak at a local college. After his performance, a resident professor of English "described him as a poet, a dancer, and a singer."¹ That the three main elements of artistic creativity and production—words, movement, and music—should be so combined in one religious performer is remarkable. And so it was perhaps most clearly in *hearing* Father Matthew Kelty's *performance* of his written words that their full impact became clearest. Still, he is a spiritual *writer* of deep and abiding insight.

That is perhaps a surprising way to describe a man who is far less known than his close contemporary and fellow monk,

¹ This story is rehearsed by William O. Paulsell in Matthew Kelty, *Singing for the Kingdom: The Last of the Homilies*, MW 15 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), ix.

Thomas Merton. Father Matthew produced only one book, after all, his probing 1973 spiritual autobiography, *Flute Solo*. That book was re-issued in 1994 [in a volume entitled *My Song is of Mercy*], with some sixty-nine later talks and sermons appended to it. Four more collections of homilies were to follow: *Sermons in a Monastery* (1983), *Gethsemani Homilies* (1991, enlarged in 2010), *The Call of Wild Geese* (1996), and *Singing for the Kingdom* (2008), to which I have just alluded. He also published one collection of letters: *Letters from a Hermit*, in 1983. The works are all relatively short: *Flute Solo* is just seventy-two pages in its current edition, and none of the others makes it to two hundred pages. They are works of startling insight, produced in the first blush of bright discovery. And this may account for their remarkable freshness.

The man we meet in these pages was described by his dear friend and chronicler, Mike Bever, as “a sort of mystic leprechaun.” Getting to the essence of such a man in print Mike has likened to “capturing a lightning bug.” The question of how to proceed here was the first, and foremost.

It is a central tenet of Roman Catholic ethics and piety that there are four natural, or “cardinal,” virtues, already well enunciated by the Greeks and summarized brilliantly in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: courage, moderation, justice, and practical wisdom. Father Matthew noted that *cardo* is the Latin word for *hinge*, and so he called them “pivotal virtues.”² To that list the Christian tradition has appended three *supernatural* virtues, first described in epistolary prose by Saint Paul in his first letter to the Greek community in Corinth: these are faith, hope, and love.

This blending of pagan and Christian virtues, which is such a central achievement of Saint Thomas Aquinas, seems well suited to Matthew Kelty’s persona and to his view of the spiritual life. He made much of the pagan Celts in his own personal and ancestral history, as we will see. I will turn to that matter first, in the Introduction.

² Matthew Kelty, “Foresight,” in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 71.

With this constellation in mind, I have organized this book in two related parts: an “elemental” section comes first and contains four (natural) chapters; a “spiritual” section comes next with three (supernatural) sections. The introduction serves as my overview of Father Matthew, the man and the writer, and an initial impression of his profound importance; it will also provide me with an opportunity to introduce Matthew Kelty’s extraordinary meditations on time. Human beings, in his determined view, are in time but not of time. They are of God, and like God, they are eternal beings. Death is the passage from human time to divine time—a passage to eternity, as he had occasion to say many times. “You rob this life of its inner meaning when you rob it of its eternal significance. . . . Our immortality is not negotiable.”³ This, I have come to see only gradually, is a deeply Catholic way of viewing the matter, this passage into eternity.⁴

But between the natural man and the spiritual man stood Thomas Merton, assigned to Father Mathew as his novice instructor when Father Matthew first joined the community of Gethsemani in 1960. Some years later, the circle would close, and Father Matthew would serve in the capacity of Merton’s final confessor, before his departure for—and tragic death in—Bangkok in 1968. I have come to believe that, by tracing Father Matthew’s shifting attitudes toward (and deepening appreciation of) Thomas Merton, we also steal a glimpse into

³ Matthew Kelty, “Rehearsal for Reality,” in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 127.

⁴ This can be a powerful insight for one, such as myself, who is not Catholic. When my mother was nearing the end of her long battle with ovarian cancer, suffering multiple organ failure and placed on a respirator she had not wished to be on, my brothers and I consulted with a resident ethicist at the hospital, Saint Vincent’s in New York City. I was concerned to honor my mother’s wishes, but I was haunted by questions of time: whether this was the day she was supposed to pass on, or some other day. “In the face of eternity,” the ethicist observed, “questions like today or next month cease to have real significance.” It seemed, and still seems, a very Catholic way of moral reasoning, and I was deeply comforted by it. I remain grateful for the tradition that produced such a perspective.

Father Matthew's own complex spiritual development, his own nearly continual deepening. Father Matthew was a sharper, more impatient, and more riseable young man when he met Thomas Merton. The man we meet in these later sermons and spiritual soundings was the man who emerged through Merton's influence upon him and only, tragically enough, after his death.

No Merton, no Matthew—that is the idea. Merton was, in this sense, *pivotal*. I am not suggesting that Merton made Matthew a more spiritual man, whatever that would mean; not at all. Rather, Merton helped Matthew to see and to embrace the elemental man he already was. And in this way, Matthew was liberated, freed, and enabled to do something very different with his very different spiritual gifts.

This is not a book about Thomas Merton, though his presence is palpable throughout. That the two men may be discussed in tandem, however, is both tribute and testimony.

PART ONE
The Elemental

1. Earth

Primitives see a great significance in contact with the earth, more than just an act of humility or subjection. . . . For the ground is seen as contact with the great mother to whom we shall all return. They do not see this as degrading or even humiliating, but simply a great joyful truth: the earth is our mother. We know that Christ also is of the earth, that he sprang from earth as man through Mary, and that he was buried in the earth in going down into death, but that he made this glorious and added a new significance and dimension to earthly life.

Matthew Kelty, "The Monastic Choir as Song and Dance,"
in *Sermons in a Monastery*, 33



There are borders that do not appear on any maps. They mark territories, transitions, deep place, and deep space. I recall once hearing a professor from Venice, invited to lecture at a conference on "Mediterranean Studies," confess with a casual wave of his hand and a verbal flourish, that he did not know what "the Mediterranean" was, and he did not really know what "Europe" was either. Lord, I thought to myself, he's going to try to deconstruct this conference before it begins, like some pretentious Socratic gadfly. I was not as smart as I thought. For he continued, brilliantly. "These are fictions, of course. But this I do know," and here he paused, "in the Mediterranean we eat oil and drink wine. *Europe begins with butter*

and beer." There is deep truth in this. You will not find this truth on a map. True it is, nonetheless.¹

Monastics are often drawn to landscapes that possess power. I think of the rolling hills and the long valley at Subiaco near Rome, where Saint Benedict initiated the vast tradition of western monasticism,² not far from where I am writing this now. Or of Mount Athos³ on the Chalkidikean peninsula not far from Thessaloniki in Greece, the sacred heart of the Orthodox Christian world.

There is a hallowed stretch of ground in the central Kentucky hills roughly triangulated with Louisville and Lexington. It is stunning in its vast expanses and natural beauty—the rich soil here produces grass so vibrant it looks blue—and stunning still more for those it has produced. Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)⁴ was born here in a small cabin near the Sinking Spring

¹ I first learned this lesson from Lawrence Durrell, in this marvelous description of entering southern France: "Tournon, Valence, Montelimar and you are now in a new country, the kingdom of the olive and the cypress. Here the Mediterranean begins with its characteristic cuisine based on garlic and olive-oil, its concentration on herbs—saffron, thyme, fennel, sage, black pepper. Here, too, the aperitif changes to *pastis*—an aniseed drink which is a mild second cousin to the brain-storming northern Pernod. This, too, is the territory in which you make your first tentative exploration of the little rosé wines which are (with the famous exceptions like Tavel) hardly known abroad. Under the dusty glare of the Provençal sunlight this new diet seems supremely appropriate; appropriate too that the accents begin to change from chicken and mutton to fish—which comes to its apotheosis in the great *bouillabaisse* cauldrons of the port of Marseilles!" (Lawrence Durrell, "The River Rhone," in *Spirit of Place*, ed. Alan G. Thomas [New York: Marlow and Company, 1967], 330–31).

² See Matthew Kelty, "Saint Benedict's Day," in *My Song is of Mercy*, 101–4.

³ For lovely reflection on this spiritual landscape, see Patrick Leigh Fermor, *The Broken Road: From the Iron Gates to Mount Athos*, ed. Colin Thurbon and Artemis Cooper (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 269–349.

⁴ For Father Matthew's reflections on Lincoln, another poetic writer produced by this same sacred soil, see "Three Wise Men," in *Sermons in a Monastery*, 114–18, as well as "Our Just Desserts?" and "Trust in God's Mercy," in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 41–44.

from which the area took its name. He grew up on a larger working farm that the family rented close by Knob Creek. The land is unusually well watered and vaguely reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands. I'll come back to that.

The area received significant interest and attention from the US Department of the Interior's Geological Surveyors, beginning in the late nineteenth century.⁵ The more immediate area near the Abbey of Gethsemani was studied closely by the US Geological Survey, in cooperation with the Kentucky Geological Survey, between 1961 and 1978, the work beginning shortly after Father Matthew joined the community.⁶ Of particular interest to them was a dramatic geological uplift that separates Lincoln's Birth Home from the monastery, where an older formation called the Silurian Rock outcrop has pushed up to the surface precisely there. These findings were very helpfully summarized by the National Park Service in 2010.⁷ The report is especially useful in that it provides an historical outline of the regional findings from the Precambrian period (prior to 542 million years Before the Present [BP]), through the Paleolithic (542–231 million years BP) to the Mesozoic (251 million years BP to the present).

This region is an unusually dynamic one, in which a limestone and dolomite foundation has been covered by later,

⁵ Henry Shaler Williams and Sir Edward M. Kindle, "Contributions to Devonian Paleontology, 1903," Bulletin No. 244, Series C, *Systematic Geology and Paleontology* 69 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1905).

⁶ "Lithostratigraphy of the Silurian Rocks Exposed on the West Side of the Cincinnati Arch in Kentucky," Geological Survey Professional Paper 1151-C (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1981).

Father Matthew knew something about this: "Time is such a frail, fragile entity, so mysterious. A man picks up a stone on the road to the hill and tells me it is probably two million years old! We are immersed in an eternity that we are part of, alive in" ("A Lovely Flower Unfolding," in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 118).

⁷ "Abraham Lincoln's Birthplace National Historical Park: Geological Resources Inventory Report" (National Resource Report NPS/NRPC/GRD/NRR-2010/219).

harder deposits. As the limestone deteriorated through chemical and sub-surface water erosion, an unstable system of caves, underwater pools, and sinkholes was created. The area near the Abbey of Gethsemani is the largest such system in the United States, and the nearby system of caves around Mammoth Cave National Park is the largest such system in the world. This has created a very unusual biosphere in which surface water is relatively rare, but the entire Pennyroyal Plateau is nestled atop a complex system of underground water filtered naturally through the porous stone. The so-called “karst” landscape (derived from a Slavic word, curiously, meaning “barren, stony ground”) is thus nonetheless very close to water, which periodically breaks through to the surface in springs, pools, and occasional streams. It creates a rare, and unusual, and dynamic natural beauty, reminiscent (as I have said) of the Scottish Highlands.⁸ Small wonder they turned the place to whiskey.

In point of fact, it is a land tailor-made for whiskey, for the planting of corn and soy and tobacco, as well as for the grazing of domestic herds. It was so in Lincoln’s day, and it remains so today. “Knobs Creek” will be a familiar name to any bourbon drinker, but this small and distinctive piece of territory abounds with distilleries both small and large. Jim Beam is produced here, as is Makers Mark.⁹ The weary wayfarer who stops in any tavern in this area, no matter how small or secluded or insignificant, will be treated to an impressive selection of distilled grains, served by a bartender who can tell you as much as you wish to know about each one. Pride in the

⁸ In the Stone Age, the necessities for ancient peoples were caves for shelter, secure fresh water supplies, and hard stone (like quartz and chert) for tool-making; thus this area was ideal. It appears to have been inhabited, off and on, for at least 11,000 years.

⁹ Both enterprises were recently purchased by a Japanese conglomerate for some sixteen billion dollars, with the promise that nothing in the production would change (apparently 40% of Makers Mark’s production already ships to Japan).

production runs deep here. Neither butter nor beer, this place is defined by the bourbon.

It was here that a group of French Trappists decided to found the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1848.¹⁰ More than forty choir and lay monks departed from their home—the Melleray Abbey, which was founded in 1145 and was located in the forbidding territories of the Loire Valley in Brittany—consisting of craftsmen in various trades and a few former soldiers (together with three aged “familiar” and two orphans). While the vast majority were Frenchmen from nearby the abbey, the group included an Italian, an Irishman, a Spaniard, and a Swiss (thirteen more monks would be sent from Melleray to join them in 1851). They departed Melleray on the morning of October 24, 1848, marched on foot to Ancenis, took ship to Tours, then boarded a train for Paris; most had never seen a train before. The group then took ship at Le Havre, aboard *The Brunswick* bound for New Orleans. They left Le Havre on November 3, 1848, and, after arriving in New Orleans, boarded the steamship *Martha Washington* for a ten-day cruise up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, before landing finally in Louisville. After resting here for several days, the

¹⁰ For a history of the founding of the Abbey of Gethsemani at its centennial, see Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, 1949), as well as the abbey’s own publication, *Gethsemani Magnificat: Centenary of Gethsemani Abbey* (Trappist, KY: Gethsemani Publications, 1949).

A more recent study based upon the French archival evidence (primarily the *Annales* of Melleray Abbey and the *Memoirs* of Gethsemani’s first abbot, Dom Eutropius), is Jay Butler, “From Melleray to Gethsemani: Spreading Cistercian Spirituality in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2018): 73–95. Butler devotes his history to a close analysis of the serial eruptions of anti-clerical and anti-religious sentiment in the decades of the Revolution and Restoration in France. That the Melleray Abbey emerged from these cultural oscillations, managing not only to survive but actually to thrive, is what placed it in a position to seed Cistercian communities such as Gethsemani (its first) in the New World. My historical summary in the next three paragraphs is indebted to, and derived from, Butler’s superb essay. I am grateful to Marsha Dutton for this latter reference.

group left on foot again, arriving at Gethsemani in the late afternoon of December 21, 1848—the winter solstice.

The Melleray Abbey, like almost all monastic communities in France, had suffered terribly and repeatedly through the revolutionary paroxysms of the first half of the nineteenth century. The French Revolutionary Assembly dissolved all monastic orders, including the Cistercians, in 1790, though some monks stayed on at Melleray until 1792. It was then that its properties were pillaged and the lands sold at auction. Most of the monks fled either to England or to Switzerland; a large cohort of French transplants and English additions returned to Melleray in 1817, and within a decade they had far exceeded their former numbers and constituted the single largest Trappist monastery in France. After the 1830 revolution, the tide turned once again; Melleray was pillaged and depleted of its monks, but public reaction against the process was so severe that its fortunes were quickly restored. The decision to seed a new monastery was due primarily to the practical fact that Melleray had outgrown its capacity by the time of the 1848 revolution. Wary of committing new resources to the vagaries of various French regimes, the abbot, Dom Maxime, elected to send his monks to a more stable, and religiously friendlier, revolutionary republic: the United States.¹¹

The oldest member of the party, Father Benezet, died on the Atlantic crossing at the age of seventy, a concrete and dramatic indication of the sacrifices to which all had been called. If one is inclined to tracing the influence of origins, then there is much about this voyage to consider closely. Observance at Melleray was strict and austere; the monks ate once a day and drank

¹¹ Dom Maxime mentioned a curious added feature for his decision in the *Annales*. Some American Catholics of abolitionist sympathies believed that a Trappist monastery at Gethsemani, displaying the virtues of manual labor, would inspire the local whites to take up such labor themselves, thereby creating the condition for the emancipation of their black slaves. See Butler, "From Melleray to Gethsemani," 92.

only water. But these transplant monks elected to add wine to their diet on the transatlantic crossing and shared the Loire Valley's largesse with other passengers, especially the nursing mothers. And so a new monastic tradition was born in the New World; it is hard not to recall Noah's cultivation of the grape in the aftermath of his long sea voyage, and the chaos that ensued. Abraham Lincoln was just twenty-nine years old at the time our stalwarts arrived in Kentucky, trying to make his way as a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois. One wonders what he would have made of the news. One may also wonder what the Vatican made of this news, the founding of a second men's monastic community in the United States in as many years.

Surprisingly, a thorough investigation of the Secret Archives at the Vatican Library turned up nothing regarding the founding of the Abbey of Gethsemani, just a precious few file folders containing correspondence about several loose and probably overlapping scandals. The first such file¹² contains a body of rather funny correspondence, beginning with a real gem, dated May 4, 1893, that is, less than fifty years from the Abbey's foundation.

Submitted by one Rev. B. Patrick, M.D., at the behest of the Abbot of Gethsemani, it informed the regional Church authorities that an experimental treatment (called the Keeley treatment) had been initiated at the Abbey a year earlier but had recently been suspended in order to be moved to a separate facility at Mt. Olivet, just one half-mile from the Abbey's grounds. Designed for what the Doctor quaintly refers to as "priests addicted to the liquor habit," the treatment consisted of four daily hypodermic injections, combined with oral supplements taken every two hours while the patient was awake, at the cost of one hundred dollars per patient for a treatment lasting four weeks in total. In the course of that month, the

¹² ASV: Delegazione apostolico / STATI UNITI D'AMERICA / IX. Louisville. 1 / Padri Trappisti di Gethsemani (1893 / 1901-1902 / 1906).

Doctor marveled, all appetite for liquor was banished by this treatment. Dr. Patrick indicated that he had delivered the treatment to twenty-five priests from Gethsemani in the last year (which would amount to roughly two priests per month), and that all but one of them had returned, almost miraculously, to their full duties. Hence, he opined, there was no remaining excuse for priests in the area to disgrace themselves and the religion they served. Based on the evidence of the remaining letters in this folder, whether excused or not, this problem persisted . . . with the predictable consequences for priests and local congregations, alike.

The five succeeding letters trace the travails of one Rev. John Lerman who was ousted from Gethsemani for excessive love of the bottle and who subsequently pleaded unsuccessfully for reinstatement. Father Matthew knew a thing or two about this history.

Monks preach hospitality and practice it. Years ago, about a century, give or take a few years, the third floor east had private rooms reserved for priests who had drinking problems. Bishops would send them here for penance and reform for a month or two or longer. To be sure, we did nothing special for them in terms of their addiction. No one did in those days. Alcohol was thought a moral problem.¹³

So it was not necessarily the case that the carrying-on was by Gethsemani-based monks, at least not exclusively, so much as that Gethsemani was being used as a field hospital of sorts, in which and with which to reform any wayward priests in the region. Naturally, something special was being done for them, though Father Matthew (who was a great admirer of Alcoholics Anonymous) remained suspicious of the efficacy of moral cures for medical problems, like addiction.

¹³ Matthew Kelty, "The Greatest of the Sacraments," in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 93.

The next two files¹⁴ move from comedy¹⁵ to tragedy: the first, outlining in some detail an eerily familiar case of sexual abuse involving the Principal of Gethsemane College, one Darnley Beaufort; and the second, a larger file concerning another wayward priest, one J. F. McSherry. McSherry, after serially abusing alcohol and several children in his care, appears to have appealed his case against the Bishop of Louisville to the Holy See, prompting a frustrated summary of the case by the Secretary of the Sacred Consistorial Court in Rome, who comments on the generally low and wayward quality of North American priests (*sacerdoti degenerati e scandalosi*, “degenerate and scandalous priests,” were his words). Father Matthew was painfully aware of this problem, if not of this particular story, and attempted to turn it into a question of repentance rather than theodicy—on the whole in a less-than-fully convincing way.¹⁶

¹⁴ Archivio della Delegazione Apostolica negli Stati Uniti. IX. Diocesi. Louisville (Kentucky) / Posiz. 15: Il Rev. B. M. Benedict; and Archivio della Delegazione Apostolica negli Stati Uniti. IX. Diocesi. Louisville (Kentucky) / Posiz. 18: Stato del Rev. J. F. McSherry, di Gethsemane. (1898–1904, 1911, 1916–1917).

¹⁵ Comedy returns in Archivio della Delegazione Apostolica negli Stati Uniti. IX. Diocesi. Louisville (Kentucky) / Posiz. 47: Rev. F. X. Havelburg, di Trappist, ed il Vescovo (1909), in which a hapless Jewish convert, F. X. Havelburg, left the abbey and traveled to Rome to gain a hearing at the Holy See. Upon his return, he pleaded that he understood the apostolic delegate in Washington, DC, to have given him leave; the delegate gently but firmly demurred.

¹⁶ I am thinking primarily of the following essentially moral observations: “One could say that Catholics deserve what they get in their priests, but the statement is gratuitous. The first twelve picked by Jesus give a good lesson. They were chosen by the Son of God. One of them was a disreputable man named Matthew. It would seem that more than appearances are involved. We really do not know much about the deeps of life.” And again:

There are 50,000 victims of sexual abuse in Kentucky, according to a University of Kentucky poll a few years ago. Some of them became priests. Probably the past was never mentioned or noted, just a past hidden or denied, as is, or was, the usual approach. The great denial shared by our society. . . .

A last file (presumably written in 1923 and emended in 1930)¹⁷ provides some general information about the Abbey of Gethsemani and the surrounding diocese. The diocese was founded in 1808 with its seat in Bardstown, before later being transferred to Louisville. Its first bishops were

Flaget: 1808–1841

Mons. Spalding: 1841–1865

Mons. Laviaille: 1865–1867

Mons. McCloskey: 1867–1909

Dionisio O'Donaghue: 1909– , but when he became infirm, an assistant (*Coadjutore*) was appointed: Mons. Giovanni Alessandro Floersh

Here comes my Irish superstition again. Are these guilty priests victims for the rest of us, expressions of God's displeasure at American morals or, if you will, American Catholic morals? Is the shortage of priests something we had coming, that we don't deserve them if we pay small heed to them?

Since I am troubled by these thoughts, I have to deal with them. . . . Can we read God into such tragic events as these? I don't think so. It is not that simple. Reading the mind of God is not that easy.

So instead of looking out, I look in. . . .

So the suffering of these priests does not so much make them victim souls immolated for themselves and all of us. Rather, they give us one more taste of the human scene. Our beautiful world and our beautiful people, not to say our beautiful children, are touched by the darkness of evil. Against that there is no hope save in the grace of God and the mercy of God.

("Our Just Desserts?" and "Trust in God's Mercy," both in *Singing for the Kingdom*, 42–44.) To conceive of alcoholism and sexual abuse as disease and disorder certainly does shift the moral register as Matthew wishes to do. But to assume that all such priests were victims in their turn, and to focus exclusively on their victimization, fails to address the need to break cycles of violence against self and other and misses entirely the extent of institutional cover-up. I must confess that I find these essays, especially the latter, among his most puzzling. They were published in 2008.

¹⁷ Archivio della Delegazione Apostolica negli Stati Uniti. IX. Diocesi. Louisville (Kentucky) / Posiz. 70: Visita Apostolica (1923?, 1930).

The diocese is described as having fallen on hard times, with poor leadership, declining numbers, and declining income. In addition to the Abbey of Gethsemani (with its 118 monks and accompanying School), other Catholic orders included The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, The Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross, The Dominican Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic Hospital (led by three Sisters' organizations, Franciscan and other), and two groups of Ursuline Sisters with 600 members. It was the Sisters of Loretto, incidentally, who had acquired the land upon which the Abbey of Gethsemani was eventually to be built.

Most of the Catholics in this area were Irish and German, with some few Italians and, significantly, three African American communities.¹⁸ In November 1928, one Matthew O'Doherty died, leaving \$4 million in his estate, some \$2 million of which he left to the Catholic diocese. When the family contested the will, a compromise was reached, requiring the Church to return \$725,000. But most of the gift had been in stocks and real estate, and by 1930, their value had plummeted. The diocese managed, through Bishop Floersh's ministrations, to take out a loan to manage the payment.

Thirty years later, when Father Matthew Kelty joined this community, the Abbey of Gethsemani and the diocese were very different places. And the place continued to change through his very long, if episodic, tenure there.¹⁹ The presence of Thomas Merton (1915–1968) had something to do with that. Not only did Father Louis (the name Merton was given) serve

¹⁸ Toni Morrison has done much to remind her American readership that the Catholic Church had a far better record than its Protestant rivals in defending the rights of all peoples and promoting abolition in the United States; she converted to Catholicism at the age of twelve. For some striking reflection on this issue, see Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

¹⁹ A new book, Michael Casey and Clyde F. Crews, *Monks Road: Gethsemani into the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), tells this story beautifully in essays and photographs.

as Father Matthew's novice master when he first joined the community,²⁰ but Father Matthew served as Merton's confessor in his last year at the monastery. Merton eventually convinced the abbot, Dom James, that the eremitic life was in fact compatible with Cistercian tradition, and thereafter lived more peripherally on the grounds of the abbey.²¹ That same abbot followed suit when he stepped down,²² and even Father Matthew maintained three small retreats in his long life at the monastery. Merton also made the Abbey of Gethsemani famous through his voluminous correspondence, the endless range of visitors, and, most of all, his published books. As time went on, the Abbey was quietly transformed into an intentional community that puts a premium on the fine arts.²³ Father Matthew was an important contributing member to that change as well, in his homilies and in print.

So this place has a history, as well as a spirituality and stunning physical landscape. But we must go deeper, as Father Matthew was fond of saying—quite literally, in this case. The US Geological surveys have revealed the presence of massive amounts of fossilized deposits in virtually every layer of the region—primarily crinoids, brachyopods, bryozoans, corals, and, later, small marine animals such as trilobites. In the Paleozoic period, when scientists believe the world consisted primarily of one enormous landmass (“Pangea”), this place was underwater. It was a part of the so-called Iapetus Ocean,

²⁰ See “Flute Solo,” in *My Song is of Mercy*, 10–14, where Matthew recalls this period as an “ordeal.”

²¹ Matthew Kelty, “On Dom James,” in *My Song is of Mercy*, 122–23.

²² For Merton's own rather ironic view of the matter, see his final journal, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), 36, 46.

²³ See Father Matthew's reflections on the role that the monk Lavrans, an icon painter of exceptional vision and rare artistry, played in this development before his departure from the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1976 (*My Song is of Mercy*, 225–28).

which later, when the African and American continents slowly pulled apart, was to become the Atlantic Ocean.

In other words before the place was Earth, it was Water.

2. Water

Though a son of the Archer and linked to fire, it is to water that I have a more natural leaning. Water is always an invitation to immersion, an immersion with a quality of totality, since it would accept all of me, as I am. Some primal urge invites me to return whence I came.

Matthew Kelty, "Flute Solo," in *My Song is of Mercy*, 65

There is no denying that the sea is a good metaphor of God. Its majesty and power stagger the mind of human beings. For the most part, the voyage was one of fair, mild weather, yet anyone who knows the Pacific knows its gift for violence and treachery. The sea can be cruel, relentless, without remorse or regret.

God is strangely like the sea. His ways are beyond fathoming, as was said long ago.

Matthew Kelty, "Flute Solo," in *My Song is of Mercy*, 27



In the beginning, there was water. This is what the first creation account in the book of Genesis declares. God's spirit hovered over it, though it lacked form, until God formed it, then formed land masses, then created life to dwell within and without. One of the more striking aspects of Christian orthodoxy is thus the doctrine of God's creation *ex nihilo*, "out of nothing." For there was something, there was material stuff;

it simply lacked form. And this primal stuff bore a name: “the waters.” Matthew would often refer to this as “the deeps.”

Gary Wills makes an interesting observation about Augustine: he only encountered water twice in his life.¹ The first time was when he left North Africa for Rome to begin his training and his eventual, tumultuous trajectory into the Christian community. The second was his return trip from the Roman port at Ostia, where his beloved mother Monica died, followed by his subsequent return to Hippo Regium and his long career as pastor, as writer, and as bishop. The imagery to which he gravitated in meditating on the divine presence involved mountains, not seas. This may have made him an especially sensitive reader of the Psalms, an altogether mountainous spiritual meditation on God,² but it left him somewhat at sea when it came to more fluid matters. In other words, this definitive doctor of the Western churches had no real feel for water.

Charles Sprawson has written a truly remarkable meditation on what he calls “the feeling for water” (as well as, he adds, “the psychology of the swimmer”). That book, *Haunts of the Black Masseur*,³ may also be read as a cultural history of recreational swimming, and is the product of a very personal and deeply Romantic obsession. Sprawson observes that the Classical Greeks swam in streams, rivers, and seas and that they peopled all of these water sources with divinity, the liquid anima that so inspired their mythic reveries:

For the Greeks water possessed magical, mysterious, and often sinister properties. There was a spring that made you mad, another that once tasted could make you teetotal for the rest of your life. In another Hera renewed her virginity

¹ Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1999), 1–2.

² Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), 121–24, 151–75, 271–78, 436, 449–51.

³ Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur: The Swimmer as Hero* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

every year. . . . Water caused men to fall in love with their reflections, reduced them to hermaphrodites, those indeterminate figures of androgynous beauty that haunted their artistic imagination. The Styx in Arcadia inflicted death on men and animals, dissolved glass, crystal, stone, corrupted metal, even gold. . . .

Greek civilisation seemed to revolve around water. The great battles with the Persians were fought near famous springs. When Lysander, the Spartan commander, was killed below the walls of Haliartus, the historian cannot help interrupting his narrative in adding that he was positioned "near the spring called Cissusa, where the infant Dionysus, according to legend, was washed by his nurses after his birth; at any rate the water had something of the colour and sparkle of wine, and is clean and very sweet to drink." . . . It was common for Olympic champions to be buried near frontier rivers, as was Koroibos, the Elean who won the first race in the Olympic Games. The Games themselves were held by famous springs or rivers, whose water flowed round the courses and among the spectators. For the lyric poet Pindar the grace of athletic movement seemed like pure water running over sand. . . . Socrates conducted his discourse on the nature of love and beauty in the *Phaedrus*, by a spring "most lovely" that flowed under them, whose water was "very cool, to judge by my foot, and the figurines and statues seem to designate it as a sacred place of some nymph and of Achelous." The once sacred stream of Ilissus now flows underground through the drains of Athens, and eventually trickles into the Kephisos before reaching the sea in a marsh which provided Byron with the woodcock he ate for lunch. 200 years ago Athens was still watered by fourteen public fountains supplied by the ancient aqueducts.⁴

The Romans, by contrast, swam in more controlled water environments; two of the defining symbols of the Roman imperium are aqueducts and bath complexes, after all:

⁴ Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, 53–56.

7. Ecstasy

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem" (1992)

The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Renescence" (1917)



Father Matthew appears to have come across this poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay in the spring of 1991; he quotes it several times in the succeeding months.¹ It is a soaring account of human possibility, the raw power of anima. And it is Romantic to the core.

I would like to recall Charles Sprawson's remarkable cultural history of swimming here, with its notable historical benchmarks: the Greeks and Romans swam, the Christians turned away from the sea, and the Romantics returned to her soft embrace.

There is an intriguing sexual subtext to Sprawson's cultural history, and it hinges on male homoerotic desire. To put it

¹ Matthew Kelty, *My Song is of Mercy*, 208, 213.

rather crudely, Sprawson seems to believe that Greek and Roman swimmers were gay (or rather, bisexual) and that the Christians turned away from this romantic idyll just as surely as they turned away from the water. The Romantics, many of the most preeminent swimmers and writers among them, were also gay or bisexual, thereby alienated from the dominant cultural norms and reacting to this sense of obliqueness with a far more private orientation, pursuing lives in solitude. There is significant overlap between Sprawson's analysis of the "psychology of the swimmer"² and Father Matthew's analysis of the gay male anima. There is deep spiritual solitude here, in the water and in the monastery.

But there is a significant caveat to be made, just here. Father Matthew was talking about love, not sex; he was also talking about anima, not the warm frolic of bodily eroticism. We should parse these differences carefully.

Plato famously argued, in an altogether audacious philosophical discussion of love,³ that madness is a gift from the gods. Like Father Matthew, he too felt it important to make some distinctions. He lists a number of experiences that we can only call spiritual, or religious, in this context: oracular pronouncement, prophetic insight, poetic inspiration . . . monastic work, as Father Matthew would have us see it (or else flute music). But, to echo the apostle Paul, Plato concludes that the greatest of these gifts is love. The word he uses is *eros*; the question of how to translate this word into English is an enormously challenging, and enormously fruitful, question to pursue. "Passionate desire" may get us closer to the semantic field, I think.

But the word does not appear in the New Testament, and, like most such ellipses, this silence is very difficult to translate. Some think that the Christians were simply allergic to Greek *eros* and tried to avoid it altogether; this is Sprawson's view of

² Charles Sprawson, *Haunts of the Black Masseur*, 17ff.

³ Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a–245c.

the matter. Others think that it simply was not a matter of deep cultural interest or concern for the early church; John Boswell made important contributions to this view of the matter.⁴ Others think that the Christian subculture simply adopted another, more peripheral and more obscure Greek word, *agape*, and adopted it as its own; this is the word, and perhaps the worldview, Paul favors. The differentiation between *eros* and *agape* has, in any case, enabled some significant and creative theological reflection.⁵

I would like to suggest that Father Matthew seemed drawn to the idea of *eros* as ecstasy, spiritual ecstasy, the dance of poetic anima. I am thinking of Bernini's audacious sculpture, "The Ecstasy of St. Theresa," with its frankly erotic, and even orgasmic, depiction of spiritual transport. There is a great deal of medieval mystical reflection that can be marshaled to defend the orthodoxy of this depiction.⁶ Father Matthew's writings may be read in a similar spiritual vein. Claiming to be neither scholar nor translator, Father Matthew in his lyrical body of written work shows himself to be both. His inspired meditations on how the organic elements combine in creatures capable of joyous ecstasy constitute the very foundation for all of his life and work. Even a casual survey of his writings confronts one with the astonishing fleshiness, sensuality, and I

⁴ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: A History of Gay People from Rome to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 61–87. A nice summary of Boswell's work and its enduring importance may be found in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*, ed. Matthew Kuefler (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁵ The Swedish Protestant Anders Nygren initiated this discussion in 1930–1936 with his two-volume work, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper & Row, 1953). C. S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960) is perhaps better known.

⁶ See, for instance, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 150–86, 245–59. It is noteworthy that the feminine anima was especially creative in its development of this trope.

daresay the eroticism, of his prose: lovemaking through liturgy, bread, wine, laughter, the communion of saints, the communion of monastic life, his passionate attachment to Mary.

But there is also the bass note of death that haunts his writing and clearly haunted him as a younger man. He was also (and equally) haunted by the present persistence of evil and of sin. His life's work was the work of transforming the fear of God into erotic desire for the divine. To live authentically and spiritually is to love in this fiery manner.

This too is an erotic insight. The point I am after here is perhaps best made by Anne Carson, the poet-philosopher whom I mentioned at the beginning of this book:

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. In the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between "I love you" and "I love you too," the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. . . .

If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.⁷

Eros is the divining rod that points to our incompleteness, the hole in us that takes time, and solitude, and passionate desire, to see clearly, then to appreciate, and ultimately to cultivate. We are cracked creatures, and as such, *pace* Leonard

⁷ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (McLean, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), 30. I am currently completing a book-length manuscript devoted to Carson's erotic philosophy, entitled *Reach without Grasping: Anne Carson's Classical Desires* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

Cohen, it is through our cracks that the divine light comes through. Our brokenness may be necessary to God, necessary to reconciliation; there must be a hole to fill; there must be some boundary to enable our transcendence. However intimately related our soul may be to divine spirit, there remains a gap, a hole, and this hole is holy, generating the desire to cross over. For Father Matthew, the love of God is erotically ecstatic or it is not at all.

In the end, for Father Matthew, there remained only this sure credo:

We are surrounded by eternity. It is just over the ridge, just beneath my mind, within earshot. We live in it as surely, more surely than we live in time. We are eternal, time is not.⁸

Transparent, that is, to the everlasting mercy.

⁸Matthew Kelty, "Veterans Day," in *My Song is of Mercy*, 218.

Acknowledgments

This book has had many friends and sources of inspiration I would like to mention briefly here. First and foremost, Mike Bever and Brother Paul Quenon were central to my conception of the work and my ability to bring it off. As I said at the outset, I met Father Matthew through Mike and first saw his importance through Mike's filmic eyes. Brother Paul was the consummate host at Gethsemani; I recall our day together at Merton's hermitage with fondness and abiding gratitude.

I am grateful to all of the monks and staff at Gethsemani; to the degree that this book is an ethnography of modern monastic life, they are the insiders who let an outsider in and made him feel at home. I hope what is written here is true to the spirit of that place.

My new home Department of Anthropology at Georgia State University has brought new life and rejuvenation into my scholarly work. My debt to them runs deeper than lists allow, but it deserves naming. Sincere thanks, then, to Parris Baker, Steve Black, Jeffrey Glover, Ema Guano, Kathryn Kozaitis (our Chair), Faidra Papavasiliou, Jen Patico, Nicola Sharratt, Bethany Turner-Livermore, Chrislyn Turner, Cassandra White, Frank Williams, and Brent Woodfill.

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The staff of the Vatican Library and Secret Archives have welcomed me with extraordinary warmth into their community for the past twelve years. Much of what I know about the Catholic Church—its deep intellectual traditions, its cosmopolitan ethos and capacity for care—I learned in its Library . . . which tells you something. I am especially indebted to Drs. Christina Grafinger, Luigina Orlandi, and Paolo Vian for their countless graces to me over many years.

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LAR
Atlanta, GA

Appendix

This is a letter that Father Matthew addressed to me, after our first visit, which Michael Bever arranged. I had sent him my first book in thanks for our visit.

Wednesday
September 19, '07

Dear Dr. Ruprecht,

Thank you for “Tragic Posture and Tragic Vision.” I write you at once, for I have 2 nieces coming tomorrow from California for a visit. If I put off a response, I may forget it altogether. I read the chapter on the Parthenon. Because it is interesting. And there is a copy of it in Nashville, TN. For a “worlds fair” years ago. I believe the Virgin Mary took over for a time. The version in Nashville has the original goddess—or a copy I should say.

You live in another world—of scholars + scholarship. The abbey here has a few scholars, but they are exceptional. But I don’t think there is any conflict between being a monk and a scholar. Or being married + scholarly.

What amazes me is that Europe, for all its chaotic history of war + division + domination, still remains a land of rich memories, treasuries of the past.

A German brother once vexed me for saying that “Americans are Kulturlos”—no culture. What he meant of course, was that

we have no history. We are so newly come on the map. All of Europe is ancient.

I send you love + thanks.

God bless your scholarship. Carry on for the glory of God. And the common good.

Come by again some time
Fr. Matthew

Note: There are many reasons to treasure a letter such as this. The care with which it was crafted, a care belied by its casual brevity, is startling. Father Matthew began, not only by addressing my book, but by zeroing in on one of its central interests: namely, the continuity between the “pagan” and Christian periods in Greece. He then undercut the depth of his insight and engagement, by claiming not to be a scholar, himself. Then he countered, admitting that a monk could be a scholar (like Merton, like him). And that a scholar could be married (as he clearly wished me to be). Next he turned my interest in Greece to his interest in the Celts: “All of Europe is ancient.” He then concluded with a gentle evangelical reminder: to consider my work in the service of God . . . and the common good. Here is poetry, poignancy, and passion, combined. Here is spirit as well. “No scholar,” indeed.