

MERTON REFLECTS

Review of

Thomas Merton
 "HONORABLE READER":
 REFLECTIONS ON MY WORK

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

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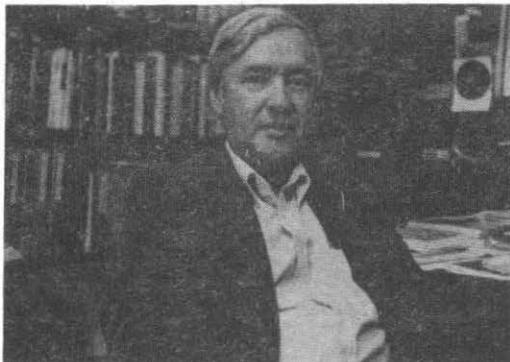
Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

This book is a somewhat expanded version of *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, first published in 1981 by Unicorn Press. All of the prefaces Merton wrote for foreign editions of his work are here, ably introduced by Robert E. Daggy. There are, in addition, three appendices that give us (1) some letters Merton wrote about proposed translations; (2) a reproduction of the now famous graph he made evaluating his various books and his judgment on them; (3) a very handy checklist of Merton's books and their various editions and foreign language versions.

Some of these prefaces are important Merton items. One often sees, for example, references to the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* which was written in 1963. Merton not only disengages himself from the youthful nature of his autobiography but makes both a re-affirmation of his monastic vocation and a profoundly felt statement about the prophetic role of the monk in society. It is a justly famous piece with its profound spirit of affirmation and its equally thundering "NO" to the evils of the world.

Daggy does us a further good service by providing bibliographical headings for each of the prefaces. This allows the reader to see quickly the permutations in Merton's writing

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program. Examples abound in this volume of such changes, but, for illustration's sake, let me cite Merton's introduction to a Japanese translation of *Thoughts in Solitude*. He wrote what is essentially a meditation on solitude in 1966 for this translation. The same year an expanded version was sent to *The Critic* where it was published in November, 1966, under the title "Love and Solitude." Both of these are amplified versions of an earlier draft. In this volume we have the second version. The third has been reprinted in *Love and Living*; edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979).

It is in a close reading of these pieces that one learns about the evolution of Merton's thinking (they are, after all, reflections on previous publications) and clues to his intentions. In a 1957 preface for a French translation of *The Ascent to Truth* (published in 1951) Merton confesses that were he rewriting the book, he would approach his subject much differently: "I would prefer to draw more on scripture and the Fathers and to concern myself a little less with scholasticism which is not the true intellectual climate for a monk." In that brief line Merton states what I take to be a basic truth about him, namely, that he was an authentic theologian in terms of the monastic tradition but not in terms of the Schoolmen. One of his most seminal contributions to church life in this century was to represent monastic theology as a living (and lived) tradition which could nourish the world outside of the cloister.

There is a further value to this volume and Daggy quite correctly notes it in his prefatory remarks. The prefaces allowed Merton to reflect on his work and augment the arguments that most deserved emphasis. In that sense they represent a kind of intellectual closure on some works done in earlier stages of his career. Conversely, we have at least one preface (to the French *La Revolution Noire*) written as an immediate reaction (in this case, to President Kennedy's murder in Dallas) which gives insight into his current thinking on a topic. In both instances, we have examples of his mature and maturing thought.

This volume would be of interest to any reader of Thomas Merton, but its particular value rests in the help it gives the close reader of his corpus both to deepen one's awareness of the nuances of his thought and to provide context not only for an understanding of that thought but for the formal process of Merton's writing regime. In that pursuit, Daggy has been most helpful. It is wonderful to have this most useful volume back in print.
