

# A CODICIL TO THE PASTERNAK-MERTON EXCHANGE

From a Letter and a Journal Entry

by **Philippe Thibodeau**

*Editor's Note:* On February 7, 1960, Boris Pasternak wrote the last of three letters to Thomas Merton. Pasternak, ill at the time, died just short of four months later — on May 30, 1960. Two years earlier — on February 28, 1958 — Merton had had a dream about a young Jewish girl who said her name was “Proverb.” This dream, coming in a period when Merton (according to Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*) was engaged in thoughts of “the Sophia of the Russians and the Book of Proverbs,” was the seminal link in a chain of events which led to the exchange of letters with the man Merton called “the greatest modern Russian poet.”

On March 18, 1958, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, again according to Mott, Merton was thinking “of the Annunciation, of the Incarnation, of Sophia, and of the so far largely imaginary Proverb.” When his interest was piqued, Merton could go into an “orgy” of activity and reading. In the spring of 1958 he ordered books on Russian literature, Russian art, Russian politics; he listened to Prokofiev — all in preparation for a “huge study” of Russia. In April he wrote to Naomi Burton Stone asking her how he might obtain a copy of Pasternak’s recently published novel, *Dr. Zhivago*. He was already familiar with his poetry and admired it.

He wrote his first letter to Pasternak on August 22, 1958, before he actually obtained and read *Dr. Zhivago*. He also sent him a copy of his recently published *Prometheus*. Two short notes from Pasternak followed. Merton’s second letter was written on October 23 after he had read *Dr. Zhivago*. He liked the book and was impressed with Pasternak’s character, Lara, who seemed to him to typify much of his thinking since his dream about Proverb. In an essay on Pasternak, he said: “Lara is Eve, and Sophia (the Cosmic Bride of God), and Russia . . . Eve is the ‘Mother of all the living’.” In his second letter, he said to Pasternak: “Shall I perhaps tell you how I know Lara, where I have met her?” He then related his dream about Proverb whom he found sophianic, Eve-like, Lara-esque.

In this letter and in his December 15 letter, Merton tells Pasternak that he is sending him a copy of *The Sign of Jonas*. Pasternak’s last letter acknowledged the receipt of Merton’s *Nativity Kerygma*, but Merton probably never knew whether he received *Jonas* or not. Philippe Thibodeau does not indicate if *Prometheus* and *Kerygma* are among Pasternak’s books.

□ **Philippe Thibodeau** is pastor of St. Peter’s Church in Sheet Harbour, Nova Scotia, Canada. He served for six months in 1991 as chaplain to the “Sisters of Mother Teresa” in the Soviet Union. It was during this period that he visited the newly opened Pasternak house-museum in Peredelkino.

## I. THE LETTER

August 20th, 1991

To the Monks at Gethsemani and to the Trustees of the  
Merton Library at Bellarmine University, Louisville:

I am sending this letter to you for your archive, in the event that you do not have the information contained in this letter, *re* correspondence between Thomas Merton and author Boris Pasternak.

At the home of Boris Pasternak outside of Moscow (near the cemetery where he is buried, in the writers' colony where he lived and wrote) I held the first-edition copy of *The Sign of Jonas* which Father Louis had sent to Pasternak . . .

I thought [the] inscription might be of interest to you, in the event that you are not aware of it. *The Sign of Jonas* was among two or three shelves of foreign (ie non-Russian) books, many of them autographed, which Pasternak kept at his home in Peredelkino, outside of Moscow . . .

## II. THE JOURNAL ENTRY

Feb. 21st [1991] — Thursday Mass this morning at 7:00 a.m. with the sisters; later on, after breakfast, three of the sisters accompanied me on a lengthy walk to the village of Peredelkino where Boris Pasternak lived, wrote, and died. We visited his home, recently opened as a museum, and afterwards walked to the village cemetery to visit his grave. A guide who spoke enough English to be understood showed us around the house. Pasternak was a simple man — his bed utterly simple, his living quarters equally sparse. My eye happened to wander over some of the books in his bookcase, to a copy of “The sign of Jonah [sic]” by Thomas Merton. It was an autographed copy and the inscription read:

To Boris Pasternak  
“abyss speaks to abyss”  
Let there be communion between  
our two silences & our two  
solitudes — I hope some page or  
other in this book may interest you  
enough for that to be possible.  
In Christ the Lord

THOMAS MERTON

I thought of the letter Merton wrote to Soviet literary authorities in Pasternak's defense when his book, *Doctor Zhivago*, was banned in Russia and he was unable to go to receive the Nobel Prize for it, and, standing by the desk on which that book was written, copied the Merton inscription onto a scrap of paper and, for all of that, felt closer to the greatness of those two men — so separated by geography and culture, so united by mutual integrity and the quest for truth. The guide told us — perhaps for the sisters' benefit — that the Bible was his favorite book, and that Pasternak derived great consolation from the sight of the golden domes of the Orthodox Church visible from his study windows, within whose shadow he now lies buried. It is said that this little church remained open and never closed, even during the purges of the Stalin era.