

# MERTON THE WRITER

(With Some Animadversions by the Writer Himself)

by **Robert E. Daggy**

I assigned Thomas Merton's landmark essay, "Day of a Stranger," in a class I am teaching on Merton this semester. The students were impressed by the thoughts he expressed, but were even more struck by the beauty and power of the writing in this description of a typical day in his life. I found it interesting that reading "Day of a Stranger" aloud seemed to make his prose even more vivid and vibrant — made it, as they say in the theater, "work." This underscored for me the fact that in focusing on the messages in Merton's writing, we all too often forget or gloss over the writing itself. *The Merton Seasonal* has carried little criticism of Merton as a writer — despite the fact that he himself delved into literary criticism. In the early 1960s, Czeslaw Milosz, Nobel laureate and correspondent of Merton's, after expressing doubts about the kind of writing Merton was doing, suggested that he might profitably turn his attention and energies to literary criticism. It was advice which Merton was to follow (in part since he never actually stopped the writing which made Milosz doubtful) in his studies of Camus, Faulkner, Rilke, and other writers. This issue is devoted to Merton as a writer.

He was not, of course, as he tells us himself and as his biographers tell us, always comfortable with that designation "writer." He was, at times, uncertain about reconciling his dual vocations as monk *and* writer. His early essay, "Poetry and Contemplation" (published originally in *The Commonwealth* in 1947), revised first as "Poetry and the Contemplative Life: An Essay" and then as "Poetry and the Contemplative Life: A Reappraisal," was largely an attempt to reconcile the two. Reports issued from the Abbey of Gethsemani at various times that Merton would be writing less in future (he never did, of course, seeming instead to write more and more as time went on). He came to feel that he had written perhaps too much, calling his accumulated papers "a mass of stuff." He was still pursuing these thoughts in 1968 as he prepared to leave Gethsemani on his Asian pilgrimage. He noted in his journal on 20 August (and there are echoes of Milosz's criticism here):

F. of St. Bernard. I have been three years officially in this hermitage.

I spent some of the morning clearing out papers from the bedroom — where most of my work is stored or filed.

Files too full. Shelves too full. Boxes.

It is really clear that I have written too much useless trivial stuff. Either on politics or on monastic problems. (I don't take account of earlier books which perhaps had their place.)

I regret less some of the recent poetry. Especially *Cables* and *Lograire*. I wish I had done more creative work & less of this trivial, sententious editorializing. . . . [Is my stuff ridiculous?] I wonder. Of course one has a duty to speak out. But as soon as you attach yourself to a "cause" your perspective gets distorted.

He had expressed some of these self doubts, using the same words "useless" and "trivial" nearly five years earlier in the statement "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library." He had a sense of making his work available and he was quick to point out that he had written "about more than just the contemplative life." He resisted classification (except possibly

as a poet) and stated that he had “articulately resisted attempts” by others to classify him as an “inspirational writer.” He concluded: “. . . whatever may be of interest to you in my work, certainly belongs to you by right. I would not feel I were doing you justice in keeping it from you. If, on the other hand, there is much here that is *trivial or useless* [italics added], I trust your indulgence to overlook it and to pray for me.”

Three Merton scholars examine Merton’s writing in this issue, two of them giving clues as to what may make that writing “work” in continuing to attract readers to Merton. Alan Altany looks at the literary classification — poetry — with which Merton seemed perhaps most satisfied and comfortable. He briefly traces Merton’s development as a “Poet of the Sacred,” noting his movement from traditional forms of poetry to the experimental “anti-poetry” of his later years.

In “Aristotle Meets the Spiritual Classics: The Rhetoric of Thomas Merton,” Mary Murray breaks ground by applying the methodology of current rhetorical studies. Rhetoric is a hot item in academe today — a “comer” as it were — and we will be seeing more work in Merton scholarship in this area. A number of scholars and writers — rhetoricians we should call them I guess — have contacted the Thomas Merton Studies Center and have begun research into Merton’s rhetoric. For instance, in addition to Mary Murray, Janet Horne (Mississippi State University) has already published articles on Merton’s sacramental rhetoric and the rhetoric of silence; Tom Bruneau (Radford University) has done work with the rhetoric of “communicative silences;” and Christopher Burnham (New Mexico State University) is interested in rhetorical analysis of the overlapping sections of Merton’s journals and *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Along somewhat the same lines, J. S. Porter compares Thomas Merton and another Kentucky writer, Wendell Berry, in “A Brief Study in Tone.” He examines how their manner of expression — their “tone” — plays an important part in the reception and perception of their messages by their readers.

Merton’s writings have inspired “a mass” of writing about him. We feature two poems occasioned by Merton’s books. “The Swimming Teacher” by Ron Webster of Colville, Washington, is a visual response to the paperback cover of *The Sign of Jonas*. “Night” by Chris McDonnell of Little Haywood, England, was prompted by his reading of Merton’s journal, *A Vow of Conversation*.

Peter Kountz’s book, *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk: A Cultural Study, 1915-1951*, is an examination of Merton’s two “vocations.” It is basically Kountz’s unrevised dissertation of the same title, completed at the University of Chicago in 1976. A rather short (twelve pages) introduction attempts to assess work in Merton studies in the last sixteen years, especially the posthumous editions of Merton’s own writings. But it is jarring — and decidedly questionable in 1992 — to find no citations in the bulk of the book after 1975 or 1976. Despite this, the book is not without interest and worth, as an early entry in Merton studies if for no other reason. Looking at it in that sense, as an early analysis of Merton’s efforts to reconcile his two vocations, I agree with Martin E. Marty who says in his “Editor’s Preface”: “This is a particularly nuanced study because of the way [Kountz] locates the vocations in Merton’s early experiences and because of the way he is informed about the history of culture, not only of monasticism or literary art.” Carl Simmons reviews the book in this issue.

Many writers have been influenced by Merton and one of these is Ron Seitz, who was something of a Merton protege in his younger days. We feature three poems from his latest collection of poetry, *The Mechanic of Tears*, as well as David Kocka’s measured review essay on the book and Seitz’s work in general. He reflects on Seitz’s development as a poet, including something of the relationship of that development to Merton. The issue concludes with our usual listing of “Publications by and about Thomas Merton.”