

ANTI-THIS & ANTI-THAT: THOMAS MERTON'S EXPERIMENTATION & PROTEST

by **Robert E. Daggy**

In 1968 Thomas Merton remarked: "The abuse of language really blocks thinking and is a substitute for it" [*The Springs of Contemplation*, p. 155]. As a significant part of his growing vocation as cultural critic in the 1960s, Merton, a crafter of words himself, considered this abuse, a debasing of language in which language becomes literally meaningless, a kind of cultural opiate which inures us to real meaning and leads us to illusions and false images about ourselves, our culture, and our God. Increasingly in the 1960s Merton began to experiment with language as part of his protest against the abuse of it.

His Columbia chums Robert Lax (in poetry) and Ad Reinhardt (in painting) were also experimenting with anti-art forms and the three wrote letters to each other in which they "played" with language. This issue focuses in part on these anti-language experimentations, leading off with an excerpt from Lax's anti-poem, "Harpo's Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton's Ways." Sheed & Ward have reprinted Merton's compilation of letters between him and Lax, *A Catch of Anti-Letters*, originally published in 1979. Brother Richard [Columban] Weber, OCSO, comments briefly on this compilation and how the two friends developed anti-language. An excerpt from *A Catch of Anti-Letters* demonstrates that their experimentation and protest went beyond anti-language as they lament the death of their friend Reinhardt.

Ted Henken examines further Merton's protest against abuse of language in his essay, "The Logic of Mass Destruction: Modern Knowledge, Kafka, and Merton's Poetry," concentrating on Merton's response to the "anti-language" of the Nazi concentration camps as expressed in his own "anti-poetry" attempts. John Dear, SJ, relates his own experience with a different form of protest (but one definitely tied to the "double talk" often used by the military) in his reflection, "Contemplative Prayer is Subversive: Reading the Bible — and Merton — in Jail." Brother Patrick Hart comments on Jim Forest's slim new volume (published in England), *Finding Your Centre: A Journey with Thomas Merton* and Jonathan Montaldo provides a thoughtful review of Matthew Kelty's *My Song is of Mercy*. The reviews are followed by the Press Release from HarperSanFrancisco (given the contract by the Merton Legacy Trust) about the forthcoming publication of *The Merton Journals*.

Finally, we feature the program for the upcoming Fourth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS), to be held at St. Bonaventure University in June, 1995. The theme-title, taken from a 1967 letter to Dom Francis Decroix, is "Summoned to Explore the Heart: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Challenge." Merton said in this letter:

It is true that when I came to the monastery where I am, I came in revolt against the meaningless confusion of a life in which was so much activity, so much movement, so much useless talk, so much superficial and needless stimulation, that I could not remember who I was I have been summoned to explore a desert area of man's heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts. An arid, rocky, dark land of the soul

(*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 156)

Note that one of the centerfold INSERTS is the information flyer for the Fourth General Meeting of the ITMS.