

# OF MERTON & DREAMS

by **Robert E. Daggy**

In a dream I saw people dancing new dances . . .

Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

Thomas Merton was a dreamer. He was a “waking” dreamer at times in his life — often having pipe dreams, or fantasies, about places he would like to go, places where he might find more solitude than he did at the Abbey of Gethsemani — the Corn Islands off the coast of Nicaragua, Alaska, that “tea plantation near Darjeeling.” But he was also a “sleeping” dreamer and dreams fascinated him, particularly, as his journals evidence, in the later part of his life.

He was, apparently, quite a graphic dreamer. Those he records are fullblown little stories, complete with places, people, and details. In fact, as one reads them today, they have a distinct “video” quality, almost as though Merton was writing little screenplays. He seems to have been able to call back to his waking consciousness the scope and substance of his dreams.

From the dream or “vision” of his father in Rome in 1933 (*The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 111-112) to his dream of the great mountain Kanchenjunga on his Asian pilgrimage (*The Asian Journal*, pp. 152-153), he set down many of these graphic dreams — some with comment, some without. The former prompted one of his “epiphanies,” a moment of insight, though it was substantially unrealized at the time. The latter occurred on November 18, 1968, just three weeks before his death and ended his “quarrel” with Kanchenjunga, the feeling of disquiet and discomfiture which he had felt observing the mountain. Donald Grayston points out in reference to this dream: “This is a dream of many parts. From one point of view it demonstrates Merton’s openness to the unconscious, to the intuitive and nonrational” (See “Merton’s Quarrel with Kanchenjunga,” *Merton Seasonal* 11: 3 (Spring 1986).

Merton was interested in other people’s dreams, as well as his own — and in their interpretation. For instance, he writes at length in his reading notebook on April 15, 1967, of Ibn al’Arabi’s interpretation of Abraham’s dream in which he was told to sacrifice his son Isaac. Arabi felt that Abraham was too willing to trust his dream and hastened to sacrifice Isaac, causing God to intervene to show Abraham the “illusion” which he had taken for truth. With Arabi, Merton seems to have been unconvinced that interpretation in the conscious state always led to authentic knowledge of the self — or indeed to the intent of the dream. He was suspicious of such people as Carl Jung and thought, at least in 1955, that Jung could not be wholly “acceptable to Catholics” (See *Reading Notebook* # 9, p. 38).

But he was interested in dreams. One which interested him especially was a dream recorded by Karl Barth. He begins *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* with the line: “Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart.” (For those who may not know, Merton’s original title for this journal was *Barth’s Dream and Other Conjectures*.) Merton recorded several dreams in *Conjectures*, one of which (the one which begins: “A dream. I am invited to a party”) has led to Melvyn Matthews’s book-length study, *The Hidden Journey: Reflections on a Dream of Thomas Merton* (1989).

This issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is devoted to Merton and dreams. Like Karl Barth, Frank Tuoti, president of the Arizona chapter of *The International Thomas Merton Society*, tries to play

Mozart every day. We begin this issue with his poem, “Mozart and the Birds,” followed by a sermon, “Mozart, Merton, and Karl Barth,” in which Carl Scovel discusses that dream of Barth’s and Merton’s reflections on it. Merton’s dream about the young Jewish girl who called herself “Proverb” (also recorded in *Conjectures*) was a persistent image, one which he shared in a letter to Boris Pasternak. Philippe Thibodeau provides an interesting “Codicil” to the Merton-Pasternak encounter. Rose Gordy’s poem, “I Dream (?) of Louie,” follows. Merton may have been suspicious himself of Carl Jung at times, but Robert G. Waldron uses Jung to interpret Merton. He examines the “Proverb” dream and three dreams from *A Vow of Conversation* in “Merton’s Dreams: A Jungian Analysis.” Jonathan Sweeney gives his poetic reaction to reading and looking at *Father Louie: Photographs of Thomas Merton by Ralph Eugene Meatyard*. Brother Paul Quenon O.C.S.O., reviews *Father Louie*, as well as a catalogue of a Meatyard exhibition, in “Merton in Apparition.” In the latter, one essayist points out that Meatyard’s photographs (and one assumes this includes the photographs of Merton) often represent “dreamstates.” The issue concludes with Christine Hogan’s moving poem, “Geraniums,” and our usual listing of “Publications by and about Thomas Merton.”