

MERTON & THE FEMININE (AGAIN!)

(With Asides about General Meetings & Polish Poets)

by **Robert E. Daggy**

January 31, 1965 — So, one thing on my mind is sex, as something I did not use maturely and well, something I gave up without having come to terms with it.

Quoted by Michael Mott in *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*

In the last issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, Robert G. Waldron's provocative article — "Merton's Dreams: A Jungian Analysis" — explored the *anima* in Merton's developing integration of self and in his gradual opening in positive and productive ways to the "feminine." Waldron feels, of course, that Merton's dreams about women (in which he sees the manifestation of Merton's *anima*) were a significant aspect of this process, leading him to the "epiphany" in Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, to the composition of *Hagia Sophia*, and onward in time to his encounter with the nurse. Certainly Merton's developing sense of the feminine (and his own spelling out of it for us) make him a significant voice for the 1990s. We look forward to further expansion of this development in a book to be published in May by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Titled *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, it was edited by Sister Jane Marie Richardson, S.L., from tapes of meetings Merton had with women contemplatives in 1967 and 1968. Three articles in this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* also continue this exploration of Merton and the feminine.

There can be no doubt (as Merton tells us himself) that his earliest encounters with women were neither positive nor nurturing. This undoubtedly contributed to his conclusion at the age of fifty that he had never used "sex" well. Even here Merton's implication is that he had never come to grips with women very well in general. Though some women in his early life — his grandmother Gertrude Merton (briefly), his Aunt Maud Pearce, Mme. Privat — emerge as benign figures, there were several who must have contributed to his inability as an adolescent and young adult to deal well with women. He portrays his mother, Ruth, as an austere and unyielding and demanding person. His grandmother Jenkins — the "Bonnemaman" of *The Seven Storey Mountain* — emerges in Merton's accounts as a shadowy, but basically ineffectual, figure. Late letters to his aunt, Gynned Merton Trier, indicate that his English guardian's wife, Iris Weiss Bennett, was less than a "mother substitute" for the teenage Merton. Tellingly, he never mentions his father's mistress, novelist Evelyn Scott, whose hovering presence (in person and at a distance) during five years of his childhood was jarring and threatening for the young Tom. It is small wonder that it took Merton many years to confront women as persons. The third president of *The International Thomas Merton Society*, Bonnie B. Thurston, offers some insight into Merton's gradual opening to the feminine in her article, "'I Never Had a Sister': Merton's Friendships with Women."

In the next article, "Merton and Sexual Wholeness," Robert Nugent, S.D.S., suggests that it was not just these early negative encounters with women which shaped Merton's attitude toward females. Though it was certainly an enormously influential factor (and though scholars have

often viewed it as *the* factor), Nugent's exploration of his attitude toward homosexuality indicates that Merton was indeed a "man of his time" — a man whose upbringing, schooling and socialization had imbued him with a strongly rooted machismo and sexism.

That Merton was a man — a man, indeed, of the twentieth century — cannot be overlooked in exploring his relation to the feminine. That he seems gradually to have been overcoming the negative female image and sexist orientation of his early years is shown vividly in the poems he wrote for and about the nurse. Usually referred to at the Merton Center as the "nurse poems" or the "love poems," they were published in limited edition in 1985 with the innocuous title *Eighteen Poems*. Douglas Burton-Christie (Santa Clara University) was one of the first scholars to examine these poems in "Rediscovering Love's World: Thomas Merton's Love Poems and the Language of Ecstasy," published in *Cross Currents* in 1989. Bill Koch comments on Burton-Christie's essay in "The Love Poems of Thomas Merton: On Being a Hermit in Love" and reflects on his basic themes that these poems are important indicators of Merton's opening to the feminine and contribute to the development of a viable spirituality of ecstasy.

The Program Committee for the Third General Meeting of the *ITMS* met in November 1991. The theme-title chosen for the meeting (which will be held in Colorado) is **ALREADY ONE: BECOMING WHAT WE ARE** — a theme, as it happens, which meshes with the articles in this issue. The issue also features two poems — by Jeffrey T. Kiernan and Pauline Pearson — inspired by the first two General Meetings. The tentative schedule for the Third General Meeting is given on page twenty-six and please note the "Call for Papers" on page twenty-seven.

Reviews of two recent books — Jim Forest's *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* and William H. Shannon's *Silence on Fire: The Prayer of Awareness* — complete the issue. The former is reviewed by Frank X. Tuoti, onetime monk of Gethsemani, and the latter by Sister Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., one of Merton's important women friends.

I am myself teaching a credit course at Bellarmine College this semester on another significant aspect of Merton for the 1990s — his contribution to communication across cultures and religions. The course is titled "Thomas Merton's Transcultural Communication," mirroring in a way the theme-title for the Third General Meeting as we attempt to look at Merton's search for a oneness that already exists. As this issue was in preparation, I was struck by the fact that the five listings in the bibliography by Merton are translations of his work published outside the United States — in Dutch, Italian, and Polish. The Polish entry is a significant one, marking the first appearance (albeit in translation) of the extensive correspondence between Merton and Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz. Translated by Maria Tarnowska (who has translated many of Merton's works into Polish) and with an introduction by Joanna Gromek, the book is titled simply *Letters (Listy)*. This correspondence should appear at some point in English because it contains, along with letters to Boris Pasternak and D. T. Suzuki, some of the most striking evidence of Merton's contribution to transcultural communication and to the development of a "transcultural person." He wrote to Milosz on 19 December 1964: "Poland is alive poetically, and I find that the Polish poets are people with whom I can feel myself in the greatest and most spontaneous sympathy. They speak directly to me, and I respond to them"



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