

IS THOMAS MERTON *AU COURANT*?: A REFLECTION

by **Robert E. Daggy**

No one with any real merit is able to be successfully and conveniently classified. At least not in such a way as to preserve the peace of mind of small operators in the academic market place.

—Thomas Merton to Stefan Baciu, 1964

If a writer is so cautious he never writes anything that cannot be criticized, he will never write anything that can be read. If you want to help other people, you've got to make up your mind to write things that some men will condemn.

—Jake Lamar paraphrasing Thomas Merton

As we gear up in 1993 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death in 1968, I am reminded of an administrator (may he rest in peace) who was quite negative as we prepared at Bellarmine College in 1978 to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Merton's death. I remember his saying: "No one's reading Merton anymore. He's on his way out!" He had his own reasons for thinking that. Perhaps it was that Merton lived just down the road, that he was a priest in the Louisville archdiocese whom some thought acted in "unpriestly" ways, that many people in the area could not follow Merton into protest against the Vietnam War or into dialogue with practitioners of other religions, that he could not conveniently be slotted into any academic category. This would not have bothered Merton. He resisted classification and he didn't care to be "academically safe." Nor would it have bothered him that someone in the 1970s thought he was on his way out. But he did not go out. As things have developed he has remained very "in," quite *au courant*. Phyllis Tickle writes in the 8 February issue of *Publishers Weekly* in an essay titled "Springtime and the Human Spirit":

Thomas Merton . . . nowadays his very name arrests the attention and commands a thoughtful regard; but things were not always so . . . [In 1941 no one] had any reason to expect the magnitude and longevity of the work that was about to begin. Yet there is no question that now, during this the twenty-fifth anniversary of his untimely death by electrocution in Thailand in 1968, the spirit of Thomas Merton pervades our spring religious books listings.

Merton's writings speak to us today—somehow—as if they were written for us today. A case in point, especially since I write this during "Black History Month." Though Merton corresponded during his lifetime with several African Americans and though he certainly wrote about African Americans, there has, seemingly, been little response to him among African Americans. We feature, for instance, the first contribution by an African American to *The Merton Seasonal* in this issue. Malcolm Cash, the young poet, feels Merton has been a major influence in his life. There have been others. There was Eldridge Cleaver's often quoted passages about reading Merton in *Soul on Ice*. A recent (31 January 1993) interview with Jake Lamar, Harlem-born, Harvard-educated journalist, titled "Black Like Whom?," says that Lamar reads Merton and is "wont to paraphrase [him] rather than, say, Malcolm X." Yet Lamar's paraphrase of Merton above points up one instance in which Merton's timeliness has recently been underscored.

Merton wrote his essay, "The Meaning of Malcolm X," in 1967. Spike Lee's film, *Malcolm X*, was released in 1992. Merton began the essay by saying: "*The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a book of decisive importance." Obviously, Lee thought the story important enough to justify a film in the 1990s. (As an aside I first encountered Merton and came to know Malcolm X as a graduate student in the late 1960s in a class on "Classic Autobiographies." Two of the works we read were *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.) Here we come to what I feel would be a timely use of Merton and a fruitful exercise for students: to read Merton's essay and to see Lee's film (of course, reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* itself couldn't hurt) and to engage in discussion of the two. Produced twenty-five years apart, it may be too much to say that Merton and Lee "agree" in vision, but there is striking similarity in their construction and conclusions. I found that reading Merton's essay after I had seen the film helped to make some of Lee's vision clearer. I have a feeling that Merton would find the film interesting, especially the conclusion when Lee has children exclaiming, "I am Malcolm X," that Merton would agree there is something of Malcolm X in all of us.

Merton's writings seem as we move further into the 1990s to be spreading into areas where he was not known or little known in the past. We feature the first translation of Merton of which I am aware into an African language—Sisters Christa Kimashi and Frieda Kisaka of Tanzania have translated Merton's well known "My Lord God" prayer into Swahili. (1993, by the way, marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Thoughts in Solitude* in which the prayer appeared.) With the end of Soviet control of Eastern Europe, interest in Merton (long submerged, with some of his writings available only on a literary "black market") has surfaced. Two Czechs in Prague —Ales Kolodrubec and Wendy Drozenova—are translating Merton into Czech (see listings in the "Publications" section). A letter reached the Merton Center in early February 1993 from Brother Pavel St. Georgiev of Rousse, Bulgaria. He says:

I grew very excited when I learned something about the life and writing of the remarkable Father Thomas Merton. So far nothing has been published in Bulgarian about him or by him I wonder if you can agree with my opinion that a book by Fr. Thomas must be published in this country? Which particular title would you recommend? May I receive a copy of it? Bulgaria is in deep crisis but the only activities booming is book production. There are about 500 publishing houses in this small country and the number is growing.

Stefan Baciu who sparked and aided Merton in his interest in Latin American literature (and who died 6 January 1993) was a Romanian. Though he taught Spanish and Portuguese and their literatures, he continued to write for Romanian newspapers in Bucharest. He wanted to translate Merton into Romanian, but that didn't happen. We feature—in memoriam—his last contribution to *The Merton Seasonal*: two poems, "Wind" and "Thomas Merton," which he wrote originally in Romanian and then translated into English.

"Anniversaries" other than Merton's death prompt attention to him and to his work. Tim Cronley of Columbus, Ohio, noticed that Merton's poem "Aubade: Lake Erie" was written and published in 1942. He wrote a responsive poem, "Aubade: Lake Erie—Fifty Years Later." April 1993 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Merton's brother, John Paul. Patrick F. O'Connell of Gannon University discusses this poem in "Grief Transfigured: Merton's Elegy on His Brother." Two other essays on Merton's poetry follow—Sheila M. Hempstead's "Emblems of Birds: Birds as Symbols of Grace in Three Poems of Merton" (a revision of the paper she delivered at the Second General Meeting of the ITMS) and Robert G. Waldron's "Merton's Bells: A Clarion Call to Wholeness" in which he examines Merton's poem "All the Way Down." Paul Pearson of London, England, contributes a short review of Esther de Waal's *A Seven Day Retreat with Thomas Merton*, a book due for publication in late spring by Servant Publications in the United States. Our running feature of publications by and about Thomas Merton concludes the issue.