

## MERTON'S JOURNEY:

### A REFLECTION ON ELENA MALITS' STUDIES IN THOMAS MERTON

By Clyde F. Crews

Sr. Elena Malits, C.S.C., wrote her doctoral thesis on Thomas Merton at Fordham University in 1974. She has written an article entitled "Thomas Merton: Symbol and Synthesis of Contemporary Catholicism" which appears in the Spring 1977 issue of the CRITIC. Fr. Clyde F. Crews, former Director of the Thomas Merton Studies Center, here offers his comments on Sr. Elena's article. Fr. Crews currently chairs the Theology Department at Bellarmine College.

*In late 1934, the young Tom Merton left for good a Europe that he considered "sad, unquiet ...and full of forebodings." And, as he revealed later in his SEVEN STOREY MOUNTAIN, Merton arrived in New York after that voyage thinking "there was no God and no love and no mercy." By the late fall of 1938 this same Merton had entered the Roman Catholic Church after four years of an intense academic, political, and personal searching for life's meaning. Those years were in truth a time of passage for Merton, or as Henri Nouwen would later style it, a passing over "from sarcasm to contemplation."*

*Rarely has the conversion story of Thomas Merton been so carefully treated and perceptively examined as in the writing of Elena Malits, C.S.C., who teaches at St. Mary's College and Notre Dame University. In her doctoral dissertation for Fordham University, "Journey into the Unknown: Thomas Merton's Continuing Conversion," Dr. Malits has insisted that Merton continued throughout his life to undergo a series of conversions, new openings and insights on life, all within the context of his fundamental Christian perspective.*

*The spring issue of CRITIC magazine carries an intriguing article by Sister Elena, "Thomas Merton: Symbol and Synthesis of Contemporary Catholicism." For those who have been unable to read the Malits dissertation, this article will provide a particularly fine overview and focusing of its content.*

*Malits makes a strong case for Merton as a kind of renaissance man, one who confronted the contemporary scene in nearly all its aspects, and yet found faith not only possible, but vital in the modern situation. Small wonder that a theologian of the stature of Dr. David Tracy at the University of Chicago could remark that Merton "may well turn out to be the most significant*



*Photograph of Thomas Merton by Gene Meatyard.*

*Christian figure in twentieth-century America."*

*If Catholicism is truly to give evidence of impact on the modern world, it must listen more carefully to its prophets, its symbol-forgers, its Mertons. It is only fitting that the very monk who at last accomplished a conversion to conversions should find as perceptive an interpretation as the Malits touch reveals. Such a commentator -- along with the other competent and insightful researchers already on the scene -- can perform a singular service: they can help Merton to speak more forcefully to a church and world that have already changed markedly in the nearly ten years since his death.*