

A MERTON MAILBAG (FROM HERE AND THERE)

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Several months ago a Merton reader wrote to inquire about Thomas Merton and the Chilean poet, Pablo Neruda (b. 1904) — whether Merton had written about Neruda; whether Merton had translated any of his poems; etc. I replied, as usual, with information — only there wasn't much information — just enough really to leave in my mind an impression of Neruda. A few weeks later some friends (the types who seem to like a film only if they're speaking in Urdu or Hungarian and which moves at a "leisurely" — read "boring" — pace) took me to our local art house ("dragged me" may be more accurate since I went protesting) to see a film "I should see." It was Michael Radford's *The Postman*, now the top grossing foreign language film in U. S. film history. And, lo, who pops up having mail delivered to him but Pablo Neruda — in exile in Italy for political protest against the Chilean government. I then thought (as indeed it turned out) that I understood why I had received the inquiry a short time before. The Merton reader had seen *The Postman*. Because of his letter and because of Merton, I knew enough about Neruda to make the film (quite a good one after all) more interesting.

Later, I thought of how important a role the "mail" played in Merton's life (the five published volumes of *The Merton Letters* themselves emphasize this) and what an important role "mail" continues to play at the Merton Center. Several years ago Raymond Nelson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, reviewed the first volume of the Merton letters, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, in *The Merton Seasonal*. He took his title from a line of Emily Dickinson's and called the review "The Mail from Tunis, Probably." Ray Nelson inadvertently gave me a line which I have used for ten years, mostly for my own amusement, as I survey and then deal with the often mountainous and diverse mail which arrives at the Merton Center. When Mail Room attendants ask what all the "stuff" is (their blank looks notwithstanding), I like to reply: "The Mail from Tunis, Probably!"

Nearly every day's "mail bag" brings letters and materials from around the world. A quick glance at "Recent Publications by and about Thomas Merton" shows that in this season we had "The Mail from Grimbergen — Harbin — Krakow — London — Montreal — Opole — Prague — Regensburg — Segovia — Southampton — Sydney — Warsaw," as well as from less exotic sounding places in the United States. "Letters — we get lots and lots of letters" — and periodicals and tapes and videos — drawings, poems and essays. Books (I half-jokingly call them "Merton-Books-of-the-Month") arrive regularly in brown jiffy bags — new translations, new collections, new editions, the long-awaited "personal journals," books that touch on Merton in some way. We review in this issue the latest journal, *Entering the Silence* (edited by Jonathan Montaldo; Basil Pennington's new collection of his essays on Merton (with another, somewhat confusing "Brother" title); and a book about the Hammer presses in which we can locate limited editions of Merton. Essays and poems come via Prades, France; St. Bonaventure University; Maryland, Rhode Island and California. The mail connects us with the vast network of Merton interest and studies, mirroring and continuing what went on during his lifetime with his own voluminous correspondence. It brings us information, often in unusual ways — just as it did Merton and as it did me with *The Postman*. We pass something of this "Merton mailbag" along to our readers.

IMPORTANT NOTE: With this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* we begin a new series of numbering. This issue is Volume 21, Number 1, Spring 1996. This enables us to publish the *Seasonal* in its designated season as well as to bring the publication in line with the numbering of other periodicals and journals. THERE WAS NO Winter issue of the *Seasonal* (so please don't ask)! You didn't miss it — it was **never** "mailed." The numbering has simply been adjusted.