

## Deep Conflict: Thomas Merton and William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*

By Robert E. Daggy

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1837 Phi Beta Kappa address, "The American Scholar," in speaking of the influence of books on a person, remarked: "Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. . . . There is then creative reading as well as creative writing."<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt that Thomas Merton was "a creative writer" and, though perhaps less emphasized, that he was "a creative reader," a person not subdued by books, but informed, inspired, impelled to comment by them. His reading was often a catalyst for his writing and, in many cases, it led him into correspondence with the writers he was reading. Two well-known examples of this "creative reading" leading to contact are Boris Pasternak and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. In both cases, Merton's reading led him to initiate an exchange of letters. In this short paper I will examine a similar, though seemingly less felicitous example of this process of reading and creativity, Merton's encounter with *In the American Grain*, written by one his favorite poets, William Carlos Williams.

The title "Deep Conflict" refers to a passage in the book about conflict in the American nature which allowed us and allows us to spoil the richness and beauty of the land while justifying ourselves by claiming to be mirrored in this richness and beauty by our very taming and despoiling of it. But the phrase can equally refer to Merton himself. Certainly the "deep conflict" between his vocation as a monk and his vocation as a writer has been examined by himself and by many of those who have written about him. There is another – not totally unrelated – conflict which I will highlight here, the conflict between Merton's identity as he saw it and his identity as others saw it. This conflict centered on how he, a cloistered monk, removed from the world, could credibly comment on the world and its issues. I suggest that he attempted to do this and was able to resolve this conflict, in large measure, through his "creative reading."

Merton always read avidly, widely, and diversely. He left a remarkable record of the books he read: the books themselves in many cases with marginal markings and notations, his reading notebooks, his writings, and his letters. He read because he

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**Robert E. Daggy**, longtime Director of the Thomas Merton Center and second editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, died in December 1997. He edited many Merton works, including *Honorable Reader*, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, and *Dancing in the Waters of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage – Journals vol. 5*. This article was first given as a presentation at the ITMS Second General Meeting at Nazareth College, Rochester, NY, 14 June 1991.



**Dr. Robert E. Daggy (r.) with  
Fr. Bede Griffiths, OSB**

enjoyed reading, but he also indicated at various times that he read to keep himself aware and informed. He may have been a monk, but he believed that the monk retained an obligation to be aware. He often told his novices in his lectures that being a monk did not mean that one should know *nothing* of the world.<sup>2</sup> This attitude gained Merton influence outside the monastery as well. For instance, Jefferson Barros, a young Brazilian writer and political activist, stated in an interview in *Jornal do Brasil*, that there had been three great influences in his intellectual development: Antonio Gramsci, a founder of the Italian Communist party who died in 1937 as a result of imprisonment by the Fascists; Jean-Paul Sartre; and Thomas Merton. He states that he learned from Merton that, even when one lives in a monastery, even when one lives in silence and isolation, one is still, as Barros puts it, a “political being,” one can still keep oneself informed, aware, involved.<sup>3</sup>

Another part of Merton’s impulse in preserving a record of his reading came from his awareness that many people, particularly when he began to write on controversial issues and social concerns, doubted whether a “marginal” person, a person who existed on the fringes of society, should or could appropriately speak and write on such matters. Merton knew that some people felt he should confine himself to the “spiritual” (in quotation marks). He was, at times, called upon to justify himself. Within the Cistercian Order, there was frequent doubt about the appropriateness and advisability of Merton’s writings. In one censor’s report on *The Secular Journal*, this is clearly stated:

The subject matter is a melange of the author’s opinions on matters of art, World War II, profane authors, travel and whatnot. It is definitely not a “spiritual book.” I have no objection to the book on matters of faith or morals, nor to the style and the slang used (with the exception of the word “lousy”). It is simply a matter of opportuneness, which is included in the instructions given to the censors of our Order.<sup>4</sup>

This question whether or not Merton should write on non-spiritual matters, though an important one, was not the only one asked by the censors. They also wondered whether Merton, living in a monastery, had the knowledge, the information, the expertise to comment on the wide range of subjects which engrossed his attention. In a report on the essay, “The Jesuits in China,” dated 16 July 1962, the censor asked whether Merton really knew enough to be writing on the subject. He further commented: “The whole article lacks a cohesive theme, rambles considerably, makes unexpected animadversions rather remotely connected with the subject. Perhaps this is the intent of the article.”<sup>5</sup> This kind of questioning, I think, caused Merton to identify his sources and to demonstrate that, much of the time, he was not speaking in a void, but reacting to a specific book or article available to any reader, including a monk. Much of Merton’s later writing consisted of book reviews or mentioned books he had read. He used the books as springboards, as starting points, to express his own views – and, in that sense, he certainly followed Emerson’s dictum about “creative reading.”

He attempted with censors (and with others) at times to head off negative reaction by citing his sources. For example, he tried this in his essay, “Target Equals City,” by including a footnote: “The facts in this article are taken from a recent detailed study of the events which shaped the decision to use the A-bomb at the end of World War II. *The Irreversible Decision* by Robert C. Batchelder . . . is a clear and persuasive plea for a clear and definite stand in regard to nuclear war, in place of the vague and unprincipled pragmatism which guides decisions today. Our meditation can serve as a review and recommendation of this book.”<sup>6</sup> But the censor was not to be dissuaded by this information. He stated:

It is my opinion that permission should not be granted for the publication of this article, and that the author should be asked to present no further articles on this subject. . . . It seems to me that the questions may justifiably be asked, "If Cistercians are separated from the world, then why are they discussing this problem? Is it possible for cloistered Cistercians to keep abreast of present-day literature and discussion in this field? What is the competency of cloistered Cistercians in this field?"<sup>7</sup>

Suffice to say that, in this case, the censor seems to have won out and the essay was not published until its inclusion in the posthumous collection, *Thomas Merton on Peace*.

Merton was to encounter this "conflict" between what he saw himself to be and the image others had of him from other sources than the Order's censors. This occurred as a result of his reading William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* and his subsequent writing to Williams about the book. It has been suggested that Merton found little that interested him in American poets until the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> But he seemed to have been reading Williams for some time and, in fact, was the first person to check Williams' *Collected Earlier Poems* out of the Bellarmine College Library (Mott 351).

There were, in fact, between Williams and Merton – as with other people – those "connections" I continually find amazing. Merton was probably unaware of some of them: Williams was a friend of art entrepreneur Alfred Stieglitz and says he often hung out and met people at Stieglitz's gallery in New York, particularly in the early 1920s.<sup>9</sup> Merton's father, Owen Merton, exhibited his watercolors at the Stieglitz Gallery in 1920. Many of the people Williams and the elder Merton knew were considered part of the Stieglitz "group." They may even have known each other. Novelist Evelyn Scott had affairs with both Williams (whom she called "Buffalo Bill") and with Owen Merton (whom she called "Mutt").<sup>10</sup> Merton himself made in a point in 1968 to meet and visit with Stieglitz' widow, Georgia O'Keeffe.<sup>11</sup> And, as Merton pointed out, he and Williams shared the same publisher, James Laughlin of New Directions.

Merton read, as it happened, the 1956 New Directions reprint of *In the American Grain*.<sup>12</sup> He read it and took notes on it in 1961. I would suggest that Merton was, by this time, "creatively reading" in order to inform himself in many areas, one of which was that huge, vague, nebulous entity which we might call the "American character." Here I think it is important to bear in mind that Merton was not, after all, a typical American. His knockabout childhood, his European education, his *avant-garde* parents left him, I would suggest, with some gaps in his American identity. These gaps he tried to fill in by reading such books as *In the American Grain*. We get, in fact, as much Merton as we get Williams in his notes on the book. He himself thought he received quite a bit of Williams: "One suspects that there is very much of Williams himself in this, but what does this matter if in fact there exists a real intuitive sympathy for his subject?"<sup>13</sup>

Merton's notes are based on only one chapter in the book though his marginal markings indicate that he read the entire work. The chapter is "The Discovery of Kentucky (Daniel Boone)," which takes up about ten pages. Merton was interested in "the deep American conflict" which Boone, as presented by Williams, represents, how the real Daniel Boone, in Williams' words, had been "buried in a miscolored legend and left for rotten" (AG 130). Boone becomes, for Merton, the opposite of the "organizational man." His first paragraph of notes, obviously written after a visit to Berea College in the Appalachians, reads:

Hollywood & TV have made pioneers hateful. They pretend merely to present them as the boyhood self of the organizational man, his pretense of an individual

image – in buckskins.

The Daniel Boone Tavern at Berea – long, white, officially American (genteel colonial, substantial, Southern, Saturday Evening Post) on the edge of the charming campus where you can get a BA for making peanut brittle. The old ladies sitting in the broad lounge, this time of the afternoon, watching TV, something going on at the College, a social gathering, students questioned by the announcer, barely able to reply.

Daniel Boone the Father of Kentucky.

Glimpse down the street at the raggedy woods on the Cumberland hillsides, where the hillbillies live. Out there at Sand Gap I could have got me a chair.

Merton then proceeds with notes which are a commentary on what he calls “W. C. Williams’ sympathetic essay on Daniel Boone”:

Boone the solitary, not Filson’s Boone, however [this is a reference to the early history of Kentucky by John Filson, for whom “The Filson Club” in Louisville is named. Filson’s Boone rather resembles the screen image of John Wayne!]. Not Boone the Lone Ranger (friend of Tonto the Indian. Tonto means stupid). Boone who is still somewhat English, but from Pennsylvania, 18th century Pennsylvania . . . Boone’s need for a “descent to the ground,” passion for special wilderness that was destined for him, which he disputed with the Indian, but not as other shooters did, with a deeper understanding and with a different “wild logic” . . . His distrust of his own kind . . . He establishes himself in clear words as “the antagonist of those of his own blood whose alien strength he felt and detested, while his whole soul, with greatest devotion, was given to the New World which he adored & found, in its very expression, the land of heart’s desire.”

He is no ancestor to organizational man. He has disowned our society.

In his typical fashion, having seen Boone as a “marginal figure,” Merton identified with him. His reading of this essay prompted him to write to Williams on April 6, 1961. He first told Williams that he had been reading his poetry “from the thirties on . . . with great pleasure.” He then continued:

Recently I opened up the “American Grain” & came upon your fine essay on Daniel Boone. It moved me very much. I have a little house in the woods near the Abbey & all my neighbors are Boones & I guess I myself have become a Boone in my own way. What you said about D. Boone is profoundly meaningful, in a time when I get so sick of our infidelity to the original American grace that I no longer know what to do. Anyway Daniel Boone had it & I think you have kept it.<sup>14</sup>

Williams’ reply, written four days later on April 10, was not a particularly friendly one though he signed it “Affectionately yours.” He said to Merton in the first line: “The passionate addiction to God which you show me has penetrated even my thick hide.”<sup>15</sup> Williams’ answer makes clear that he probably did *not* consider Thomas Merton a modern Daniel Boone. He makes no allusion to that at all. After two rather convoluted paragraphs he told Merton:

But to return to the poets from the painters we’ll say Allan Ginsberg does not represent a godly man but what else is he with his worship of the mother image. Overcome your aversion to the beatniks and distaste for vulgar and profaned language and read the first part of KADDISH and if you aren’t elevated in spirit I miss my guess. This is a religious poet.

Whether this reply was prompted by Williams' age (he was seventy-eight), his infirmity (Merton mentions that Williams had been ill), or by reports from James Laughlin of Merton's sometime objection to *New Directions'* publishing of such authors as Henry Miller and Ezra Pound because they used four-letter words is a moot point. (As an aside, Merton was soon to strike up a correspondence with Miller who replied much more cordially and encouragingly than Williams.) Williams would have been surprised that more recent observers have placed Merton, in the 1930s, in the vanguard of the "Beat Movement."

The response was undoubtedly jarring to Merton, and it pointed up again the conflict between his image of himself and the image that others held of him. But he did take Williams' suggestion and he did read Allan Ginsberg and was later to comment on him and his poetry. He replied to Williams on July 11, the last of the three letters of their brief exchange, but one written with some pique: "I agree with you about [Ginsberg]. I think it is great and living poetry and certainly religious in its concern. In fact who are more concerned with ultimates than the beats? Why do you think that just because I am a monk I would be likely to shrink from beats? Who am I to shrink from anyone. I am a monk, therefore by definition, as I understand it, the chief friend of beats and one who has no business reproving them. And why should I?"<sup>16</sup>

Merton's "creative reading" in this case does not seem to have gone any further, possibly because of Williams' less than pleasant reply to his overtures. I have found no further references to himself as a kind of Daniel Boone. Though he continued through the 1960s to examine the conflict in the American nature and to encounter conflict between what he felt he was and what others thought he was (or wanted him to be), he continued with his creative reading and writing. He was, indeed, an embodiment of Emerson's *Man Thinking*, a person who used books, not to end thought and questioning and inquiry, but to start it and to provoke it. Merton was a type of the "scholar" who Emerson said took knowledge and "gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. . . . Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his; – cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame" ("AS" 85, 87). In his reading, in his writing, in his contacting writers (with the exception of William Carlos Williams), we can see Merton struggling to create, to spark a flame, and thus to gain the effluence of God.

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- 1 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, edited by Robert D. Richardson Jr. (New York: Bantam Classic, 1990) 87-88; subsequent references will be cited as "AS" parenthetically in the text.
  - 2 Tape # 24A, "The Christian in the World" [5-15-66], Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 3 "Un romancista para quem tudo politica," interview with Jefferson Barros, *Jornal do Brasil* (1 September 1979).
  - 4 Censor's Report: *The Secular Journal*, by Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 5 Censor's Report (16 July 1962): "The Jesuits in China," by Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 6 Thomas Merton, "Target Equals City," in *Thomas Merton on Peace*, edited by Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall, 1971) 94.
  - 7 Censor's Report: "Target Equals City," by Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 8 Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) 479; subsequent references will be cited as "Mott" parenthetically in the text.
  - 9 William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951) 236.
  - 10 See D. A. Callard, *Pretty Good for a Woman: The Enigmas of Evelyn Scott* (New York: Norton, 1985) 88; Robert E. Daggy, "'A Great Soul': Owen Merton – May 14, 1897-January 18, 1931," *The Merton Seasonal* 11.3 (Summer 1986)2.
  - 11 See Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1982) 57.
  - 12 William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956); subsequent references will be cited as "AG" parenthetically in the text.
  - 13 Thomas Merton, "Reading Notebook # 13," 40-41, Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 14 Thomas Merton to William Carlos Williams, 6 April 1961. Williams Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.
  - 15 William Carlos Williams to Thomas Merton, 10 April 1961. Thomas Merton Center, Louisville, KY.
  - 16 Thomas Merton to Williams Carlos Williams, 11 July 1961. Williams Papers, Yale University.