

Thomas Merton's Path toward Writing on Racial Concerns

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One facet of Thomas Merton's "turn toward the world" that currently sparks interest involves his writings on racial concerns in the U.S. Though his first published essays on the topic did not appear until 1963, his awareness of racial dynamics in his adopted country had begun to grow in preceding years as he increasingly folded social concerns into an expanding sense of his contemplative vocation. The following overview highlights several early indicators of this expanding vocation as it pertains to race and culminates with his initial published articles that publicly address it.

Merton and the Marginalized before 1960

As with most aspects of Merton's blossoming interest in social and inter-faith topics during the 1960s, threads of his awareness of racial injustice trace back into his pre-monastic history. Merton mostly spent his childhood in Europe, which offered few chances to directly interact with Black Americans. But his enrollment as an undergraduate at Columbia University, situated next to Harlem, offered ready access to African American neighborhoods and the New York jazz clubs he frequented. Following graduation, his two weeks as a Friendship House volunteer would later shape both his memoir's haunting description of Black experience in Harlem,¹ which the African American activist Eldridge Cleaver famously looked to for inspiration while in prison,² and at least one early poem: "Aubade – Harlem," published in *A Man in the Divided Sea*³ and dedicated to Baroness Catherine de Hueck, who founded Friendship House. Merton displayed early sensitivity toward the consequences of Western colonialism as well, when he supported India's right to self-determination during his British boarding school years.⁴

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 344-49.

2. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968) 54-55.

3. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946) 42-43; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 82-83 (subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text).

4. See Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 222-23; subsequent references will be cited as "SD" parenthetically in the text.

The Marginalized of Latin America

Those reflections on Harlem aside, Merton mainly focused on his inward journey and the workings of monastic life during his first decade and a half within Gethsemani's walls. But in the latter 1950s his gaze rapidly widened.⁵ Perhaps the facet of this expansion that most directly nurtured his awareness of marginalized minorities was his abbey's exploration of possibly founding a Latin American daughter community. From the outset of his many journal reflections on this project, in which he strongly hoped to participate, Merton associated it with an intrinsic monastic obligation to serve the continent's indigenous peoples who might live in proximity to the foundation. He seemed inspired, in part, from considering the experiences of Charles de Foucauld, a hermit living among indigenous Muslims in the Algerian desert during the early twentieth century, and fellow Trappists at Toumliline, a Moroccan monastery, also situated among Muslims.⁶ His initial recorded reflection on exploring foundation possibilities, entered on July 30, 1957, captured this awareness: "The hope of a monastery in Ecuador. . . . To be a monk in a country where your being a monk would mean a great deal to everybody – to have one monastery that would help a whole country very much – And for the Indians – and because of our sins and the sins of all conquerors, particularly, of the conquistadores. And everyone" (SS 103-104).

In the weeks and months that followed, Merton put much thought into how and where such a monastery might work. In late August 1957, under the heading "Latin American Foundation," Merton assessed four additional countries (Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela, Paraguay) as possible sites for a Cistercian foundation and included this reflection:

The great problem of every South American project – entering a country where the hierarchy in fact always supported conservatism, injustice, and tyranny. And in that environment, without silly politics and without going outside the limits of one's vocation, being on the side of progress and social justice. For instance, something for the Indians in the Sierra region of Ecuador. (SS 113-14 [Aug. 29, 1957])

5. Beyond observations of this section, numerous readings and interactions came into play regarding his broadening awareness during these years, such as readings of and contacts with Eastern Bloc writers like Boris Pasternak and Czeslaw Milosz, as well as readings of Gandhi and Emmanuel Mounier and many others.

6. See for example Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 103 [July 30, 1957]; 113 [August 29, 1957]; 287 [June 7, 1959]; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.

His optimism that he might participate in founding a Latin American house was bolstered by an influx of postulants and novices from that region during those same months,⁷ and he peppered his journal with observations of Latin American art, literature, history and indigenous pre-history drawn from an array of acquired reading material on the region. One of his more intriguing notations, written in February 1958 under the heading “*Land Problem in Latin American foundations,*” sought to assess whether it would “be regarded as an injustice for monastic community to acquire a [Latin American] property” big enough to sustain a foundation, and he used the “redistribution of land in the [post-revolutionary] agrarian reform of Mexico” as his measure (SS 169-70 [Feb. 16, 1958]). As he anticipated participating in such a foundation, then, Merton clearly felt a Latin American monastic presence carried local social as well as spiritual implications, at one point explicitly stating: “a monk *should* have something to do with the world he lives in and should love the people in that world” (SS 149 [Dec. 27, 1957]).

His abbey’s influx of Latin Americans – Father Lawrence (Ernesto Cardenal) in particular⁸ – also introduced Merton to several Latin American poets with whom he would build and maintain extensive correspondence into the 1960s. In her masterful study of this often underappreciated development in Merton’s life, Malgorzata Poks⁹ notes how these relationships helped to capture his imagination of their world. Through these “indigenist” poets, who often sought to recapture in their work the worldview of the region’s inhabitants before colonial conquest, Merton gained a greater awareness of and affection for those displaced, marginalized and oppressed as Western powers sought to control distant landscapes and peoples for their own gain.

Although his relationships with Latin American poets would continue to flourish, not far into 1958 Merton’s dreams of founding a monastery there began to founder. On the last day of February his abbot informed Merton he would not be sent to Latin America to help pursue a foundation and that thoughts of such a project were premature. When he discovered a few weeks

7. His journal names at least seven of these men between August 1957 and August 1958: Fr. Lawrence (Ernesto Cardenal) from Nicaragua (SS 105 [Aug. 3, 1957]); Fr. Restrepo from Colombia (SS 120 [Sept. 17, 1957]); Fr. Crisanto from Colombia (SS 145 [Dec. 10, 1957]); Fr. Fernandes from Brazil, via a Peruvian seminary (SS 166 [Feb. 11, 1958]); Fr. Pablo (Guillermo Jaramillo) from Colombia (SS 173 [Feb. 21, 1958]); Fr. Francesco Solano (Antonio Canedo) from Argentina (SS 188 [April 4, 1958]); Fr. Bede from Brazil (SS 145 [Dec. 10, 1957]).

8. Cardenal is first mentioned by Merton in his August 3, 1957 journal entry (SS 105).

9. Malgorzata Poks, *Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Katowice, Poland: Wyzsza Szkola Zarzadzania Marketingowego, 2007).

later that the abbot was secretly learning Spanish, Merton came to recognize that any foundation the abbey made there would be carefully controlled and limited by the abbot, without Merton's involvement or under the objectives he had been formulating. He also felt that the short tenures and rapid departures of most Latin American postulants at Gethsemani took with them the potential to build relationships within the region needed to successfully found a monastery there. Although he still yearned for an opportunity to live in Latin America, over the following year he mostly relinquished the idea, despite tantalizing suggestions from Latin American bishops and encouragement from Ernesto Cardenal not to give up on the idea.

In May 1959, however, a visit from Dom Gregorio Lemerrier – the Belgian abbot of Our Lady of the Resurrection Benedictine monastery at Cuernavaca, Mexico – radically refocused Merton's ambitions (see *SS* 277). Dom Gregorio forcefully encouraged Merton to seek exclaustation from Gethsemani and relocate as a hermit in Latin America. He offered to personally champion this move, and proposed that Merton temporarily affiliate with his own Mexican monastery as a hermit to reorient himself until he was ready for a more permanent decision. Merton embraced this suggestion and over the next six months expended great energy envisioning its possibilities, rigorously questioning its implications for his vocation and self-examining his motives for such a move. And in this, awareness of local marginalized populations once again surfaced in his journals.

Beyond Cuernavaca, other possibilities for relocation came to his attention, and three in particular remained high on his list: the Corn Islands off Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast, populated by a Creole mix of African and Indigenous peoples; Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, among local people of African descent; a Native American reservation in New Mexico. Journal entries during this time of hopeful discernment included such remarks as:

The conclusion then that God is calling me to a kind of missionary solitude – an isolated life in some distant, primitive, place among primitive and simple people, to whose spiritual needs I would attend. *Not* a missionary life pure and simple, nor a solitary life pure and simple, but a combination of both. (*SS* 293 [June 14, 1959])

Before God I have an obligation to leave the society as best I can. Indians, or the Negroes of Tortola, or etc. (*SS* 299 [June 30, 1959])

What I need – as far as I can interpret the desire in my heart, is to make a journey to a primitive place, among primitive people, and there die. (*SS* 318 [Aug. 18, 1959])

This pursuit also ended in naught that December as Rome gently denied his request for exclaustation, despite Dom Gregorio's advocacy. Merton obediently accepted this decision as God's will, resolving to continue refining his vocation at Gethsemani (see *SS* 358-60). But a lasting impact of this saga for Latin American relocation, despite its failure, seems related to how it helped Merton expand his sense of vocation to engage with nearby marginalized peoples. Although the bulk of his journal reflections on vocation continued to emphasize his personal need for solitude and contemplative silence, his extended consideration of living in a new region and interacting with its inhabitants particularly impressed upon him a need to consider the place of marginalized peoples in his expanding vocational turn toward the world.

At the same time, Merton never managed to transpose that vocational need for engagement concerning marginalized neighbors back into observations about race in his local Kentucky location – despite opportunities to recognize this in his visits to Kentucky's segregated urban centers (including his famed March 1958 Louisville epiphany [see *SS* 181-82] of kinship across humanity). But even though he never explicitly stated it in these terms, one suspects that once he was *required* to refocus on living out his monastic life within the United States, this expanded sense of vocational connection to those marginalized remained with him. If so, it supplied grounding for him to grow more aware of those marginalized in *North America* as also part of his calling.

African Americans

During these years of the late 1950s, though his awareness of African American experience remained at the periphery it was not fully absent. A few brief, isolated entries acknowledge his awareness of the emerging civil rights movement far beyond his cloistered walls: “We [Merton and visitors Mark and Dorothy Van Doren] talked of this crazy race business in Arkansas and everywhere, a problem that has been created by politicians”¹⁰ (*SS* 123 [Sept. 29, 1957]); “Faubus in Arkansas: the curse of God must be on this country!!”¹¹ (*SS* 217 [Sept. 22, 1958]); “The meaning of this integration business in the South . . . That would be something worth

10. No doubt he refers to the mid-September 1957 confrontation at Little Rock's Central High School, when in response to Governor Orval Faubus' refusal to enforce school integration, President Eisenhower deployed federal troops to protect nine Black students from anti-integration mobs.

11. On September 12, 1958, Governor Faubus ordered the closure of four Little Rock schools in response to a Supreme Court ruling that the city's desegregation plan must be carried out.

understanding. It is important and prophetic"¹² (SS 232 [Nov. 21, 1958]).

As with first-hand opportunities to learn from Latin American novices or postulants about lived experiences in South America, Merton also had limited occasions to interact with at least two African American members within his abbey's community, though one did not arrive until 1960. But unlike the Latin Americans, who were mostly priests or choir novices, these two men were lay brothers; therefore, during that era of stricter silence and greater segregation between choir and lay novices, Merton would have had fewer opportunities to interact with these African Americans than he did with the Latin Americans. One was Brother Josue, or Thomas Glover, a former jazz saxophonist who lived as a monk at Gethsemani from 1949 until his return to secular life in 1962. At the abbey, Glover reapplied his dexterity with fingering saxophone keys to typewriter keys; as a typist at ninety-five words per minute, he sometimes worked in the abbey's office, where interaction with Merton seems plausible.¹³ The other was Brother Martin de Porres, who lived there from June 1960 until his death in 2016.¹⁴ Their abbot Dom James alluded to Martin de Porres in a 1963 letter to one of Merton's later African American correspondents when he wrote: "Here at Gethsemani we have given opportunity to many colored boys, but it seems our life thus far is a little too different for them to persevere. At present we have only one of the colored race, and he is doing very well at the present time."¹⁵

Another opportunity for Merton's interaction with African Americans during these years surfaced through correspondence. At some point in late 1958, a young Black Franciscan nun who signed her letters "Sister Marie Pius, O.S.C., of Christ our King," reached out to Merton for edification, and an exchange ensued. She was terminally ill with cancer, and they

12. Merton doesn't disclose what prompted this comment. Perhaps he had read of the October 25, 1958 "Youth March for Integrated Schools" in Washington. Ten thousand strong, it was organized in response to Gov. Faubus' recent actions and promoted by Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Daisy Bates, Ralph Bunche, Jackie Robinson and Roy Wilkins; see: <https://www.crmvet.org/tim/timhis58.htm>.

13. Marc Crawford, "The Jazz Musician Who Became a Monk," *Ebony* 15.12 (Oct. 1960) 35.

14. Personal communication from Br. Paul Quenon, January 6, 2020. On December 9, 1963 Merton noted that Br. Martin "is now the only Negro in the community" (Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997] 44; subsequent references will be cited as "DWL" parenthetically in the text).

15. April 25, 1963 letter of Dom James Fox to Marlon Green; Marlon Green Correspondence, archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

corresponded until her death six months later. None of Merton's letters to her, and only two of her three letters to him, survive. She had found in Merton's writings great consolation regarding fears that her prayers and desires for spiritual knowledge were somehow misguided, and Merton sent her two of his books: *Thoughts in Solitude*¹⁶ and *The Ascent to Truth*.¹⁷ She mostly addressed him as "Father" in her first surviving letter, but as "my dear brother" in the second.

In those two letters,¹⁸ Sister Pius offered Merton glimpses of her personal background as well as her experience as an African American. She was born Protestant, with a mother influenced by "Masonicism," as she phrased it. While still in school, she helped raise the child of her niece to age four – Cantrella, whom she greatly loved and described as "very pretty" with "beautiful brown curls and brown skin." Upon returning home from school one day, her mother informed her that Cantrella had been "tagged and railroaded to Georgia" to live. She was traumatized by losing her relationship with the child, and "one day while sitting at my desk at school something whispered inside of me and said pray to the Blessed Mother." Thirteen months later, in July 1954, she converted to Catholicism. She described her decision to be a nun as an unlikely joke to friends and family, she being one who "loved fine cloths and all the trimmings."¹⁹ She apparently joined the convent not long after conversion, since by the time she wrote Merton she had completed her novitiate and was fulfilling her monastic "simple vows." The prior schooling she referred to may have been to learn secretarial skills; one of her tasks in the convent was to type the personal letters of her abbess, and as her health failed, the Reverend Mother provided her a typewriter on a rolling cart so she could continue typing assignments in her cell between periods of bed rest.

She also offered Merton glimmers of African American experience and the realities of segregation. The arrival of Sr. Pius was apparently a significant event for her order, as she reported that: "This community holds the record of taking into their midst the first Negro Poor Clare in the U.S. little insignificant me. The Visitors are always deeply impressed because in the middle of integration these kind hearted and Christ-like sisters took me in." Her community had "spoiled [her] with kindness,

16. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958).

17. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

18. December 28, 1958 and February 23, 1959 letters of Sr. Pius of Christ the King, OSC to Thomas Merton (TMC archives); all quotations unless otherwise noted are from the February 29, 1959 letter.

19. December 28, 1958 letter of Sr. Pius to Merton.

from the very first day [she] rang their bell asking for admittance." In her illness, "all of the Poor Clares in the U.S.," "Franciscan fathers in our Province," and the "Blessed Sacrament Sisters in the city and their schools" were praying for her recovery. Beyond that, the "Daughters of Charity" permitted her to stay in their private infirmary, although it was "a white hospital and unfortunately they do not take colored patients," adding that "it was never a dull moment in that hospital."

Sr. Pius also devoted a long paragraph to explaining various "Negro Spirituals" to Merton. She shared how most "have stories behind them" and quoted lyrics from five different songs, including the iconic phrase of rejoicing upon emancipation: "Free at last free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last." She elaborated that "There were not any schools, nor music, but God came and hid Himself into the very depth of their hearts. It is his gift to the Negro." She added that, "There are other times when they lifted their hearts and sang 'Steal away . . .' And still there were [*sic*] one who went into the woods alone and lifted her heart and sang." She concluded, "So you see quite a few of these spirituals were composed under the whips."

Given Merton's identification with his French origins, her comments on New Orleans surely resonated: "This city is French you know . . . Most of the people even among the colored people. We were not taught to speak the broken French they speak," alluding to the local Creole dialect. Upon learning of her death, Merton recorded in his journal: "Sr. Pius, the Negro Poor Clare in New Orleans, to whom I felt very close, died on the 15th of June perhaps without receiving my last letter. But I know she is praying for me" (SS 301 [July 2, 1959]).

Although Merton's engagement with the complexities and oppressions of race in the U.S. failed to fully emerge during these final years of the decade, such hints surface and suggest that groundwork toward it was being laid. His aspiration to relocate in Latin America prompted deeper assessment of the ramifications his vocation held for those who inhabited the immediate landscape. It led him to reflect on how that vocation might require engagement with and service to those oppressed by "the sins of all conquerors." Meanwhile, an awareness of the plight that Black North Americans faced hovered at the periphery, and then perhaps drifted closer into focus through the letters of a young, terminally ill Black nun. When he received the message that relocation to Latin America simply would not happen, his vocational sensitivity toward those marginalized increasingly focused on where he henceforth lived: the United States.

Merton and African American Experience, 1960-1963

Whatever groundwork may have been laid in the late 1950s and whatever the impact the December 1959 denial of his quest to relocate in Latin America,²⁰ his 1960 journal and correspondence record a marked uptick in his interest in U.S. racial concerns. Merton also found occasions to consider racial oppression during early 1960 through letters with Louis Massignon, a mystic and scholar of Islam whom Merton highly respected. Massignon was then protesting in Paris against French treatment of local Algerians during the war over Algerian independence and working for education of Ugandan youths under the patronage of a martyred Ugandan saint.²¹

Merton's Vocational Reflections in 1960

A clear suggestion of Merton's emerging awareness of vocational implications regarding race appeared in one of his published essays as well. During the early months of 1960, as Merton revised and expanded an earlier manuscript into what would become "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude," he included this paragraph:

There are crimes which no one would commit as an individual which he willingly and bravely commits when acting in the name of his society, because he has been (too easily) convinced that evil is entirely different when it is done "for the common good." As an example, one might point to the way in which racial hatreds and even persecution are admitted by people who consider themselves, and perhaps in some sense are, kind, tolerant, civilized and even humane. But they have acquired a special deformity of conscience as a result of their identification with their group, their immersion in their particular society.²²

That May he then explicitly expressed this linkage of vocation to race – significantly, *now* as it pertained to his particular location – after browsing through Robert Penn Warren's 1956 volume *Segregation: The Inner*

20. This yearning would again arise in the summer of 1960; see *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 26-27 [Aug. 5, 1960]; subsequent references will be cited as "TTW" parenthetically in the text.

21. See journal entries of Apr. 14, 1960 (SS 384), May 8, 1960 (SS 388) and May 25, 1960 (TTW 3).

22. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York; Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 183 (first published in a special printing in mid-1960 as *The Solitary Life* by Victor Hammer). For a detailed review of the evolution of this text, see William H. Shannon, "Reflections on 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,'" *Cistercian Studies* 29.1 (1994) 85-99.

*Conflict in the South*²³ at the Bellarmine College library. This small book recounts conversations that Warren, a novelist and poet, shared while traveling the South in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision against segregation. Warren's vignettes capture the dissonance, angst and resistance many white Southerners felt as they grappled with the ruling's implications:

Powerful and objective, gives a good idea of the problems in its human aspect. A typical American approach, just describing how all these individuals say they feel about the thing. But it adds up to something decent and is not one of these stupid public opinion polls. It is done well and with a concern for reality. The reality of the south to which I belong – without ever thinking of it. You can be in a Trappist monastery and never become a Southerner. But I am becoming a Kentuckian and a conscious one. There is no point in trying to evade it. It means of course talking to people and I do that, in Louisville, and Lexington. (SS 391 [May 18, 1960])

In the same entry Merton followed this with extended commentary on South African Apartheid and his realization that it was more severe than the “race-prejudice in our own South, like our segregation which is bad enough.” He was appalled to consider that “The Afrikaaners are Christian fundamentalists. Bible Christians! What an indictment of Christianity! Yet if they *read* the Bible they would know what they were doing. And we too!” He concluded from reflecting on these dynamics, half a world apart, that

At least, some of us know that we don't see and that we are secondly, stupid, befogged, helpless. That our vague good will can do nothing. . . . I must do all I can at least to learn and understand and try to see things as they are and know what I at least can do about them. It is appalling to be drained and blinded by the mental habits we cultivate here in the name of love and holiness. Yet it is obvious that I am called to pray for the world. (SS 391-92)

A couple weeks later Merton again journaled reflections on the expanding social implications of his monastic vocation:

Honestly, [my solitude] is a search for perspective – and for commitment. . . . Question: 1. Can the Gospel commitment, in Gospel terms, be considered enough, or must it be translated also into concrete,

23. Robert Penn Warren, *Segregation: The Inner Conflict in the South* (New York: Random House, 1956).

contemporary social terms?

2. Is my commitment by religious vows enough or must it be clarified by a further, more concrete commitment

a – to a *monastic* policy

b – to a *social* viewpoint for myself and the other monks?

3. . . . [Does] to follow the church even in politics necessarily impl[y] going in the direction of justice and truth, despite appearances to the contrary? . . .

Commitment – to the point at least of reading and studying fully these questions not speculatively but in order to form my conscience and take such practical actions as I can. . . . Part of my vocation!! (*TTW* 8-9 [June 5, 1960])

And then in a letter to Herbert Mason that June, Merton noted in passing a missed opportunity to interact with a civil rights advocate: “I have not had any direct contact with the Negro problem in the South, but I was hoping that a Protestant Negro minister who is in the forefront of the non-violent resistance movement would show up here. He may still do so and I would have an opportunity to speak with him.”²⁴ Who that minister was remains a mystery, but if it happened to be Martin Luther King, it represented the first of three missed opportunities to meet King before their deaths in 1968.²⁵

Significant Readings and Interactions of 1961 and 1962

Merton continued to ponder how social concerns melded with his vocation for several more months, and the frequency of political and global observations increasingly peppered his journal pages. One especially noteworthy entry from March 1961 captures his growing affirmation of nonviolent civil rights advocacy and his identification with the African Americans who sought those rights.

The Negroes and their struggle for integration into American society: not only do they have to face the enormity of the whites who are completely unsettled by their irrational fears, but they have to face fear, guilt and passivity in themselves: one of the most difficult things

24. June 1, 1960 letter to Herbert Mason, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 267.

25. One opportunity occurred when Merton hosted a Fellowship of Reconciliation retreat for peace advocates in November 1964; though invited, King instead became scheduled to travel to Oslo to receive his Nobel Peace Prize. The other occurred in early 1968 when plans for a retreat with King, Vincent Harding and probably others that spring ended with King’s April 4 assassination.

is for them to admit completely in their hearts what they know intellectually: that they are in the right. It is fine that they have a leader who can direct them in the way of non-violence. But the situation is so ambivalent that there remains danger of violence – as the less rational whites seem to sense intuitively. Great admiration and compassion for the Negroes. (*TTW* 99 [March 11, 1961])

But 1961 did provide for occasions to follow through with his commitment of “talking to people” about race as he had voiced the prior spring. As one example, E. Glenn Hinson recalls that when he and two other Southern Baptist Seminary faculty members from Louisville visited Merton at his hermitage that June, Merton was especially keen to discuss Baptist experience with race. Hinson recounted for him the story of a Mississippi pastor fired by his congregation for promoting integration.²⁶

Then in August, Merton received a letter from Marlon D. Green, a Black pilot who faced discrimination in the airline industry, followed by a visit from Green later that month. Green was at an emotional low point in his seven-year legal battle to prove that commercial carriers refused to hire him because of his race, and he sought Merton’s perspective on his plight. Merton encouraged him to continue his pursuit, which ultimately prevailed with a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court unanimous ruling in his favor. This interaction with Green, apparently his first with an African American directly engaged in pursuing racial justice, almost certainly provided Merton with a profound personal, first-hand understanding of racial discrimination.²⁷

Merton’s awareness of race in the United States expanded further in 1962 through letters, readings and relationships with white allies of African American civil rights. One early example was Merton’s mention to his new friend, Daniel Berrigan, SJ, that he had read a recent *Catholic Worker* article on segregation by Dan’s brother Philip,²⁸ who at the time served in New Orleans with the Josephites, an order dedicated to service

26. Oyer discussion with Hinson, August 20, 2019; Hinson visited Merton on June 20, 1961 (see *TTW* 129).

27. For an account of Merton’s relationship with Green, see chapter five in Gordon Oyer, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton’s Letters on Peace, Race and Ecology* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021) 121-32; subsequent references will be cited as “Oyer, *Signs*” parenthetically in the text.

28. Philip Berrigan, SSJ, “The Race Problem and the Christian Conscience,” *The Catholic Worker* 28.5 (December 1961) 1, 4-8; June 15, 1962 letter to Daniel Berrigan in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 74 (subsequent references will be cited as “*HGL*” parenthetically in the text). Berrigan’s letter to Merton mistakenly stated that the article was published in the January 1962 issue.

among African Americans. In May, Dan Berrigan wrote to Merton from his post at Le Moyne College in Syracuse about local Catholic concerns over integration's impact on parishioner property values and his work with Phil to send Le Moyne students into the South where they could learn firsthand about segregation there.²⁹ Both Berrigans visited Merton that August, offering more opportunities for Merton to hear personal accounts of the challenges faced by those who addressed racial dynamics in the U.S. In an address to Merton's novices that week, Dan Berrigan reflected on the liturgical and Eucharistic implications of racial discrimination within the Church.³⁰

In addition to Merton's tutelage by the Berrigans that year, he also began a friendship and launched steady correspondence with John Howard Griffin, who visited Merton that year and whose book *Black Like Me*³¹ Merton had read that March. This memoir shared Griffin's experience traveling the South as a white man with skin chemically darkened to appear Black. Their ongoing relationship also provided Merton a perpetual window into U.S. racial dynamics.³² Then in December Merton's friend W. H. "Ping" Ferry forwarded to him James Baldwin's "Letter from a Region of My Mind," published the prior month in the *New Yorker* magazine.³³ His introduction to Baldwin's work proved pivotal in launching Merton's first publications on race in the year that followed.

*James Baldwin, MLK in Birmingham
and Merton's Initial Publications on Race in 1963*

This exposure to Baldwin, coupled with the escalation of racist violence in response to Birmingham, Alabama demonstrations, kept Merton squarely focused on matters of race throughout 1963; his journal references the topic nearly every month that year. His February 23 entry, for example, reports that by then he had read both Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (comprised mostly of "Letter from a Region of My Mind") and his *Nobody Knows My Name*. "He seems to know exactly what he is talking about, and his statements are terribly urgent," Merton assessed. "Above all he makes very shrewd and pointed statements about the futility and helplessness of white liberals, who sympathize but never do anything"

29. May 16, 1962 letter of Daniel Berrigan to Merton (TMC archives).

30. See Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 136-38.

31. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

32. See for example, William Apel, "Out of Solitude: Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Racial Justice," *The Merton Seasonal* 36.3 (Fall 2011) 17-22.

33. Dec. 31, 1962 letter to W. H. Ferry (HGL 213).

(*TTW* 297). A later entry noted John Howard Griffin's telling of how Clyde Kennard – a young Black man who attempted to enroll at Mississippi State University – had been framed by police, imprisoned in Mississippi and tortured there under hard labor despite needing hospitalization for cancer (from which he soon died) – all in response to his attempted enrollment (see *TTW* 300 [March 4, 1963]). Other entries commented on Black Muslim resistance and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (see *TTW* 325-26 [June 1, 1963]); that fall's famed March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (see *DWL* 15 [Sept. 3, 1963]); the Birmingham, Alabama, Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four young girls (see *DWL* 17 [Sept. 19, 1963]).

But it was his friend Jim Forest who prompted Merton's first occasion to publicly voice his thoughts on race. Forest had recently become an assistant editor of *Liberation* magazine and invited Merton's response to a contributor who criticized James Baldwin as a modern-day "Caliban"³⁴ – the violent half-human, half-monster character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Merton promptly provided the response, written on the heels of pilot Marlon Green's April 22 Supreme Court victory. He sent it formatted as a letter addressed to Forest, perhaps with Trappist censorship concerns in mind. But *Liberation* published it as an article under the title, "Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom."³⁵ In it, Merton vigorously defended Baldwin, praised his insight on "the white problem that is now threatening to ruin America," and derided the hypocrisies and contradictions of even those whites who voiced support for racial justice:

No amount of sentiment, good will, public relations, and friendly images [by whites] will serve to stem the tide of violence. The basic issue is one of rank, crass deeply rooted *injustice*. . . . What is demanded is not that everybody *like* everybody else, or that everybody get together with smiles and bright maxims of optimism and mutual esteem. *What matters is that justice be done.*

This piece was published in the June issue of *Liberation*, alongside the initial publication of King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." In later correspondence, Merton explained to Forest that his prior year's Trappist censorship,³⁶ which prohibited his publishing on the topic of war and peace, required careful and strategic decisions about what and when to

34. Wallace Hamilton, "Let's Along and Do the Murder First," *Liberation* 7.4 (June 1963) 17-19.

35. Thomas Merton, "Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom," *Liberation* 7.4 (June 1963) 20-22; see Appendix below for the complete text of this article.

36. See Merton's April 27, 1962 journal entry (*TTW* 216).

publish. “It is only on condition that I watch my step in things like [a request to publish a letter (topic undisclosed)] that I will perhaps be able to continue with more important things like the last piece in *Liberation*. However, I would not be surprised to run into more trouble soon, and so the future is uncertain.”³⁷

In early May, immediately after he finished his *Liberation* response, the demonstrations in Birmingham led by Martin Luther King, Jr. also caught Merton’s attention. On May 10 he commented in his journal on “Much trouble in the South, Alabama. Negroes demonstrating, cops turning firehoses on them, getting after them with police dogs. . . . Pictures of fat-arsed police . . . arresting Negroes, dragging them off” (*TTW* 317). But it was pictures from the “Children’s Crusade” phase of these demonstrations that inspired Merton to pen his first poem on the civil rights movement. Those photos showed dogs and fire hoses turned specifically on the Black youths who had turned out to give their voice and presence toward their liberation. By early June, Merton had responded to these images with his poem, “And the Children of Birmingham,”³⁸ which using irony described the force of “man’s best friend, the Law” turned against them. It was eventually published in the August 10, 1963 issue of *Saturday Review*.

Again, sometime before August, Merton also penned a book review of William Melvin Kelley’s novel, *A Different Drummer* – the allegorical story of Tucker Caliban, a southern Black farmer who rejects life there on white terms. Merton considered its message to be the same as James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, namely: “the Negro has a mission to free the white man: and he can begin to do this if he learns to free himself. His first step to freedom must be the clear realization that he cannot depend on the white man or trust him for anything, since the white man is hopelessly impotent, deluded and stupefied by his own alienation” (*SD* 89). Merton added, “The school children of Birmingham would have convinced me [of this], if I had not been already convinced” (*SD* 90). This review was first published in the September 1963 *Jubilee* as “The Negro Revolt,” but the following year Merton also included an expanded version in *Seeds of Destruction*, there titled “The Legend of Tucker Caliban” (*SD* 72-90).

37. Unpublished portion of June 24, 1963 letter to James Forest (TMC archives).

38. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 33-35; *CP* 335-37. Merton’s June 10, 1963 letter to Forest (*HGL* 275) mentions it as completed and in the Trappist censorship process. For a study of the poem, see Patrick F. O’Connell, “Thomas Merton’s Civil Rights Poetry” in Angus Stuart, ed., *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Vision* (Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Radstock, UK: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005) 89-96.

In his revised opening, Merton identified the book with a “present sense of *kairos*” then being expressed in Black literature, which also included the works “especially of James Baldwin, who ranks with Martin Luther King as one of the most influential of Negro spokesmen today” (SD 74).

Another intriguing document Merton apparently produced within this same May–July time frame was a letter addressed to James Baldwin, eventually published in *Seeds of Destruction* (SD 302-306). It appears in the back of this 1964 book as letter #28 within a collection of thirty-five “Letters in a Time of Crisis.” Three quarters of these originated from his then unpublished “Cold War Letters” collection, written between October 1961 and October 1962, and it seems that he published these thirty-five “Crisis” letters in the chronological order in which he had written them. If so, this dates his letter to Baldwin somewhere between December 1962 (#27) and October 1963 (#29).

The precise context for this letter addressed to Baldwin remains unclear: no response from Baldwin has been located, and we don’t know for certain that he ever received it or if Merton even sent it. However, various clues permit an educated guess as to how it originated. The letter’s content affirms what Baldwin wrote in the *New Yorker*, which Merton had read in late December 1962, and both Merton’s April “Caliban” essay and his Baldwin letter make nearly identical observations about *New Yorker* advertising that appeared next to “Letter from a Region of My Mind.” His Baldwin letter also refers to Merton having supported Baldwin “in print,” which surely refers to that *Liberation* defense of Baldwin. If the Baldwin letter does allude to this initial Merton essay, that would date it sometime after late April 1963, when he submitted “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom” to *Liberation*.³⁹

All this in turn places the Baldwin letter near the weeks when Merton was considering a proposal from *Ramparts* magazine to publish an exchange with Baldwin. *Ramparts* editor Edward Keating had sent the proposal to Merton on April 25,⁴⁰ and Merton was initially excited enough by the idea to test it with his order’s censor.⁴¹ But he ultimately decided

39. Merton to Forest April 23, 1963 (working on it) and April 26, 1963 (submitted it), both in James Forest Correspondence, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University.

40. Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin, April 30, 1963, John Howard Griffin Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University [CU], Edward Keating/John Howard Griffin Correspondence (Box 11, Folder 386): request sent to Merton “last Thursday” [April 25]. Special thanks to Dr. Gregory Hillis of Bellarmine University for sharing these research materials.

41. May 1, 1963 to Fr. Paul Bourne, OCSO, in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 168-70; June 3, 1963 letter of Edward Keating

that the interest of African Americans for “dialogue” with whites was waning, and by sometime mid-June he had chosen to pen his “Letters to a White Liberal” for *Ramparts* instead of a Baldwin exchange.⁴² As these events unfolded, then, Merton may have drafted the letter addressed to Baldwin in May or early June as a first step toward launching the proposed *Ramparts* exchange, but never actually sent it to him. Merton’s letter to Baldwin also asserted, “I know you are more than fatigued with well-meaning white people clapping you on the shoulder and saying with utmost earnestness ‘We are right with you’ when of course we are right with ourselves and not in any of the predicaments you are in at all”; it also asserts Merton’s “duty to try to make my fellow whites stop doing the things they do and see the problem in a different light” (*SD* 306). Such comments may foreshadow his mid-June decision to heed his own counsel in this regard and scrap the *Ramparts* exchange with Baldwin in favor of something addressed to fellow whites.

This decision resulted in what many consider Merton’s most incisive published critique of race: “The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal” (*SD* 3-71). His July 14 journal notes that he arranged a conversation with two Black students from Louisville, then on retreat at Gethsamani Abbey, since “I am supposed to be doing a piece on the race situation, for *Ramparts*.” His entry lists various anecdotes they shared of racial tensions in the city, adding, “In addition to so many other things, and far worse things still, this is what they have to live with” (*TTW* 338). Just five days later he had finished his draft and was reviewing it, and on July 29 he reported, “I sent the article on the race problem to *Ramparts*, for August 1 deadline” (*TTW* 347). The article appeared in *Ramparts*’ 1963 Christmas edition,⁴³ released in late October that year, and Merton republished an expanded version in *Seeds of Destruction* the following year. Near its closing, Merton encouraged readers to look beyond his own words to those of “Moses and the Prophets: Martin Luther King, James Baldwin and the others” (*SD* 70).

This chronology leading up to Merton’s first published essays and poem on civil rights – initiated that April by Jim Forest at *Liberation*, immediately followed by *Ramparts*’ Edward Keating’s late April proposal and then early May’s “Children’s Crusade” in Birmingham – reveals the prominent role that his reading of James Baldwin and events under King’s

to John Howard Griffin (CU archives): “after a conference with his head censor he seems to feel that he will give us a break.”

42. June 17, 1963 letter of Edward Keating to John Howard Griffin (CU archives): Keating states that, unknown to Merton, Baldwin had expressed interest in the exchange.

43. *Ramparts* 2.3 (Christmas 1963) 4-23.

leadership in Alabama played in shaping them.

Conclusion

This overview of Thomas Merton's pathway toward publishing his incisive perspectives on race in America seeks to offer some context for the several essays published⁴⁴ and significant additional correspondence with at least three other Black men on the topic⁴⁵ that ensued in the five remaining years of his life. It suggests how this focus emerged after wrestling with the meaning of his vocation, which in turn yielded an expanded perception that his quest for deeper silence and solitude held integrity only to the extent it incorporated his awareness of and service to those marginalized within modern Western society. As a consequence of probing the existential Ground of his vocation, Merton's writings on race largely stand the test of time. They remain highly relevant for our reflection today on the complex, deeply embedded racial challenges that continue to beleaguer our society.

44. These include: Thomas Merton, "Honorable Reader": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 69-80 (a separate preface for the French publication of *La Revolution Noire [The Black Revolution]* [Brussels: Casterman, 1964]); "Religion and Race in the United States," in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 130-44 (subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text) (a preliminary version published as "The Extremists: Black and White" in *Peace News* [18 Sept. 1964] 6, in expanded form under the final title in *New Blackfriars* 46 [January 1965] 218-25); "The Meaning of Malcolm X" (FV 182-88, first published in *Continuum* 5 [Summer 1967] 432-35); "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven" (FV 165-81, first published in *Katallagete* 1 [Winter 1967] 28-34); "William Styron – Who Is Nat Turner?" in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 152-58 (first published in *Katallagete* [Spring 1968] 20-23); "From Non-Violence to Black Power" (FV 121-29; introduction to Part Three). Other relevant published poetry includes "Eight Freedom Songs" (CP 669-70, 692-93, 701-703, 711-12, 714-15, 756-57, 775-76, 779-80), written in mid-1964 as song lyrics, four of which were set to music and publically performed in 1968; "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" (CP 626-27, written in honor of Carol Denise McNair, one of four girls killed in the September 1963 Birmingham Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing and originally published in the October 1964 issue of *Blackfriars*); "Plessy vs. Fergusson: Theme and Variations" (CP 651-55) and "April 4th 1968," dedicated to Martin Luther King (CP 1005-1006), neither of which had been previously published.

45. See Oyer, *Signs*, chapters six (August Thompson) 133-53; seven (Robert Williams) 154-81; and eight (Vincent Harding) 182-201. Dr. Paul Pearson of the Thomas Merton Center has identified Merton correspondence with nearly twenty African Americans, of varied length and substance (Pearson email to Oyer, 26 Aug. 2021).

Appendix: “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom”

The following essay represents Thomas Merton’s first published article devoted to the question of race in the U.S. He wrote it in late April 1963 at the request of his friend Jim Forest, then assistant editor of *Liberation* magazine. On April 23 Merton sent a brief note to Forest that he had written five pages on “Caliban” and would send it when typed. He did so with a brief cover note dated April 26, submitted in letter form under the salutation “Dear Jim.” One suspects Merton may have used this letter format to evade Trappist censorship, which one year before (to the month) had silenced Merton on publishing about matters of war and peace. *Liberation* chose to publish it, though, as an article in its June issue, under the title “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom.”⁴⁶

In this piece, Merton responds to an essay by Wallace Hamilton entitled “Let’s Along and Do the Murder First,” published in the same issue.⁴⁷ Hamilton’s primary message criticized writers and activists who condoned violence to seek racial justice, such as David Lytton’s 1960 novel *The Goddam White Man*⁴⁸ and rhetoric of Black Muslims. He likened these expressions to Shakespeare’s Caliban character in *The Tempest*, a “savage and deformed slave” who was half-human, half-beast and who sought to murder Prospero of Milan when shipwrecked on Caliban’s island. Hamilton instead called for nonviolence in the mold of Gandhi’s efforts in South Africa and the Black Freedom Movement as then pursued in the U.S. South. He advocated for neither segregationist rejection of Black rights nor integrationist goals of full cultural assimilation and elimination of all difference. Hamilton instead advocated for nonviolent “communication” and “conversation” across races to resolve what he called a “white problem.”

One would expect Merton to sympathize with Hamilton’s call to nonviolence, which he did in part. But he vigorously disagreed with Hamilton’s casting of James Baldwin as merely a “sophisticated Caliban.” This essay by Merton is significant in demonstrating how developed his critique of race had become by the time he first published his thoughts on it, as well as how indebted he was to Baldwin for his insights. Merton considered justice enacted by whites as a more urgent response to Black concerns than white petitions for Black nonviolence. He insisted on immediate, tangible expressions of justice in all forms – including economic

46. Thomas Merton, “Neither Caliban nor Uncle Tom,” *Liberation* 8.4 (June 1963) 20-22.

47. Wallace Hamilton, “Let’s Along and Do the Murder First,” *Liberation* 8.4 (June 1963) 17-19.

48. David Lytton, *The Goddam White Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960).

– rather than simply conversation and expressions of goodwill. His commentary proves especially prescient and relevant to current deliberations about race and economic justice.

This essay has never been republished in any Merton anthologies, in Merton Society publications or elsewhere. It is made available here for the first time since its original appearance in *Liberation* in mid-1963.

* * * * *

The Caliban piece is deeply disturbing. It is another reaction to the terribly explosive situation which amounts to a sickness unto death, and is, as a matter of fact, symptomatic of what is eating away the humaneness in man's society all over the world. Twenty years ago, nobody would have believed it possible for us to be in the condition we are in today. Where will we be twenty years from now?

The fact remains that screaming doesn't help. Wallace Hamilton is certainly looking for a basically right solution, a solution that fits the human measure and is within range of what has been called "the art of the possible." At all costs, races, classes, nations, must find some way to keep talking to each other, to maintain a simple awareness of one another's human reality. If we do not do this, we are going to lapse each one into his own, private hallucinated zombie world: and then, of course, anything can and probably will happen.

Nonviolence is certainly part of the answer. But nonviolence, as Gandhi so often insisted, demands a profound moral integrity and culture. This does not mean that nonviolence is out of the reach of anyone but saints – to hold this is frankly to throw the doors wide open to the most violent anarchy. But anyone who approaches the practice of nonviolence must do so with the full awareness that this has to be a fully human, fully reasonable, and even spiritual activity. Nonviolence is a discipline and not a cult, and though discipline is regarded as a dirty word, I would like to recall its original meaning: a responsiveness, an ability to listen and to learn, not just from selected gurus and father figures, but from the rationality in nature itself, from the Torah, from Tao, from the light of conscience which, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, is the light of God Himself illuminating the heart of man. To be able to respond to these inner directives requires a fully trained moral sense, a complete moral formation. Without such formation, nonviolence gets nowhere.

This, I have no doubt, would meet with rather general agreement, as a theoretical statement; and again, when Wallace Hamilton prescribes the patient and obscure labor by which limited but feasible aims can be attained, to diminish racial tensions and to begin the immense work of restoring jus-

tice which has been terribly and so totally violated, he is speaking in these terms. In expressing his anxiety over the fantastic and arbitrary explosions of violence that are already taking place almost everywhere, Hamilton is only demanding what we all know to be necessary: That we try to retain some sort of fidelity to reason and to human principles.

The point is that more than reason is involved here. On the conscious level, the problem is bad enough. Unfortunately the race issue also involves deeply buried unconscious terrors and loves, and we have to come to grips with these also. Our conscious conduct is less than rational when we fail to face issues that are close enough to the surface of consciousness to be admitted without destroying us.

The burden of my remarks is this: I believe that in his book, *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin has done us all the immense service of raising some of these issues to the conscious level. And I think that by and large his service has been rejected with something short of due appreciation.

The fact that Wallace Hamilton classes Baldwin with the Calibans seems to bear this out.

But before I speak of this: let me say that when I read about the race issue, I have a tendency to identify with the Negro. Hence in reading Hamilton's piece, I found myself offended, because I was classed as Caliban. To be sure, the suggestion remained open, for me to consider myself a "good Negro" (i.e., one who is hep to the nonviolent movement). Yet at the same time I feel that there is so much urgency in the insistence that I be a "good Negro" and not a Caliban, that there is almost a conviction that I will be a Caliban. Now in my Negro heart of hearts I know that it doesn't matter a bit what some white man thinks of me or even expects of me. I can breathe my own air and be myself and I have no need to be suffocated by the nonsense in *his mind*. And yet . . . there is an awful readiness to hurl people like Baldwin into a pit of Calibans the moment he moves the slightest bit out of line. (Out of what line? How is he expected to discover the line I have tacitly laid down for him to toe in my mind?)

This, it seems to me, is part of the problem: even those who are most "sympathetic" to the Negro, end by being almost as rigid and as uncomprehending about their demands, in his regard, as anybody else. Basically, it comes down to how scared one is of the fact that the "Negro is different," and therefore how far one is able to go in tolerating this manifestation of difference.

The segregationist settles the question in a rather too simple fashion: "Yes, the Negro is different: that is to say – inferior." The integrationist, on the other hand, is liable to say, "The Negro is not different at all, and to prove it he has got to be exactly like me in everything."

Baldwin, whose book, *The Fire Next Time*, has met with all kinds of condemnation as a dangerous act of violent protest, seems to me to be talking a lot of sense. One can be vehement and at the same time relatively moderate, and I think he is both. I see no reason to class him as a "highly sophisticated Caliban" because he uses that hoary old quip: "What ever makes you think a Negro wants to marry your sister?" Heavens, twenty-five years ago I worked that one to death myself. And what could be more obvious? This hallucination about the Negro-who-wants-to-marry-my-sister is, as Baldwin rightly suggests, a subjective element in the white man's neurosis, and it does absolutely nothing to clarify what is basically a question of *objective justice*.

If I steal all your money, and you haul me into court, shall I base my defence on a hysterical claim that I thought you wanted to marry my sister? This is completely irrelevant! The point is this: I owe you money.

Baldwin's book is one of the most intelligent, perceptive and compassionate evaluations of the white problem that is now threatening to ruin America.

He profitably spends a great deal of time showing how it is that the white man has completely lost his capacity to understand the Negro, and gives all kinds of reasons, varying in power, to explain this. It happens that I first read this piece in sheets which a friend had torn out of the *New Yorker* and mailed to me. I must admit that the advertisements, which accompanied Baldwin's statements about the fatuous self-complacent impotency of the white male, were the most effective possible illustrations. If I pick up the "impotency" point, it is because of its highly symbolic charge: for the basic contention of Baldwin is that the white man's problem is his incapacity to love. Not merely his frequent incapacity for normal sex, which is itself only a symbol and symptom, but his incapacity to make contact with his fellow human being as a personal actuality. In this situation, the Negro has come to form a part of the white man's hallucinations, and one cannot love a hallucination, since it represents that which one cannot accept in himself.

Baldwin's protest, then, is certainly not that of a Caliban. He is declaring first of all that the Negro has to be seen in his reality, and not as a hallucination, be it Caliban or Uncle Tom.

The point is, however, not that he demands this for the sake of the Negro. The Negro is used to the situation, he is almost able to live with it. The one who most desperately needs to benefit by seeing the Negro as a human and personal reality, is of course the white man. So in pleading with the white man to wake up, Baldwin is acting out of sincere, warm

and earnest love. His book is one of the most beautiful acts of charity to the white race. It is a gift beyond appreciation, and of course we do not even begin to appreciate it. On the contrary, because he insists that we are hallucinated, we think he hates us. Is it just possible that his diagnosis is correct, and that we are all schizophrenics? At any event, if a man thinks another man is crazy and, instead of locking him up, he patiently and lovingly does things which he thinks can help to cure him, I think we ought to find a better way of thanking him than by comparing him with a stupid and bloodthirsty monster.

In view of all this, I think we must conclude that we are in the middle of an enormous problem, and that *our ways of coping with it are an essential part of the problem itself*. It is of course normal and human to assume that questions have answers, and having posed a question, to suggest answers. The trouble begins when we do not ask relevant questions. Now it is obvious that the basic questions in the race issue are moral questions: that is to say, questions of right and wrong. The unfortunate thing is that we live in a society in which the *verbal structure* of ethical considerations remains. *We talk as if* we were concerned with right and wrong. In fact it is very easy to editorialize and sermonize and come up with any number of statements about what is right and wrong in race relations. The trouble is that this very often turns out to be sheer verbalism and rests on no serious moral judgment at all. This is borne out by the fact that moral issues are generally raised in the most confused possible way, mixed up in a stew of sociology, psychoanalysis, politics, public relations – if not technical jargon on the part of the few who have actually studied ethics. The fact that we fire off judgments about right and wrong with the greatest facility and yet never set our sights on the real issues, shows in fact that our morality has completely broken down. This is borne out by the anarchy and irresponsible violence that are evident everywhere. No amount of sentiment, good will, public relations, and friendly images will serve to stem the tide of violence. The basic issue is one of rank, crass deeply rooted *injustice*. And the only thing that can right the wrong is justice in every sphere, in every level of society, in public and private affairs, in national and international relations, in everything, in every possible branch of social, political, economic, and personal life. Can we even begin to face this problem? It is on this, of course, that the survival of our society depends.

Now it is perhaps here that the very power of Baldwin's book may tend to obscure the issue. He throws up so many challenges to the white man, reminding him in the most telling ways that he is *morally* inadequate. But he does this in such a way that the white man cringes, inside,

in the same old way: he thinks he is being told he is not lovable, that he is unattractive, that he has run out of gas, and that he could be emotionally more pleasing in all sorts of varied ways. That puts him back in the same stupid rut. If he is a segregationist, he wants to shoot the Negro and be done with it. If he is an integrationist, he wants to *persuade the Negro to accept him*. At this juncture, the temptation of the Negro to fall down and die laughing simply gets out of control. But the laughter does not make anybody happy, least of all the Negro. For this is the very best of reasons. What is demanded is not that everybody like everybody else, or that everybody get together with smiles and bright maxims of optimism and mutual esteem. *What matters is that justice be done*. And justice is not a matter of feelings, in fact it is not a subjective affair at all. It is strictly objective, and this fact should not be construed as a cause for alarm or perplexity. Indeed, it makes the whole problem a great deal simpler. It is a matter of righting actual wrongs, paying definite debts, restoring very precise rights that have been ignored and violated. This can and must be done, irrespective of how everybody feels about everybody else, and quite without any special regard for the fact that there exist such people as Black Muslims, or that James Baldwin has a very particular gift for making the white race look like what it is.