

In the conclusion Kilcourse restates the movement of Merton from his early naive dualistic Christology to a radically challenging Christ of *kenosis* rooted in the world and the life we live. Merton, he says, "exposed the pretense of what masquerades as Christian spirituality when the 'true self' of Christ's *kenosis* is domesticated, or worse, denied: 'The problem today is that there are no deserts, only dude ranches.'" With Merton, Kilcourse suggests that "[t]he false self can ultimately be liberated only by the 'ace of freedoms,' the Christ of *kenosis*." "It is this Christ," says Kilcourse, that he has "tried to quarry from the strata of the monk's poetry and antipoetry, his journals, his correspondence, his literary essays."

## II

*Diana Culbertson, O.P.*

Boccaccio once argued on behalf of Dante in an age that privileged theology as a discipline that "theology and poetry can be considered almost one and the same thing when their subject is the same." He thereby aligned himself not only with Dante's own defense of his work but with subsequent readers of John Milton, George Herbert, William Blake, Edward Taylor, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and now Thomas Merton. He argued further in a burst of enthusiasm that "theology is simply the poetry of God." In this assertion he went beyond Aquinas' more simple observation that figurative language is appropriate to Scripture (*Summa Theol.* I.q.1.art. 9). The imperative to resort to figure and fiction as a strategy for theologizing needs no valiant defense. Paul Ricoeur's comment is pertinent: "Any ethic that addresses the will in order to demand a decision must be subject to a poetry that opens up new dimensions for the imagination" (Paul Ricoeur and Eberhard Jüngel, *Metapher Zür Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache* [Munich, 1974] 70).

What concerns the theological critic of Merton's poetry is whether or not the metapoetic yield can be encompassed in a theological critique or whether it can (or should) be extracted at all. The difficulty is the nature of poetry itself, which, most critics argue along with Cleanth Brooks, is unparaphrasable. To reflect on Merton's Christology using his poetry as source has further obstacles: his corpus is un-

systematic, scarcely comparable to the ordered universes of Milton and Dante—or even William Blake—and his modernist style is ironic, parodic, and more dissonant than what we customarily look for in “religious poetry.”

Thomas Merton had argued correctly that a poet, even a religious poet, is not a catechist (See “Notes on Sacred and Profane Art,” *Jubilee* 4 [1956] 26, 31), and he was consistent in his own theoretical refusal to “prostitute art as propaganda.” But Merton, whatever his assertions about the distinctions between religion and art, did use art as a form of preaching. The degree to which his poetry is kerygmatic can be measured in a real sense by the audience he attracts. Readers generally turn to him more for his religious insight than his poetic genius, although Thérèse Lentfoehr in *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* has written persuasively of his literary talents. His own literary criticism, however, rarely probes technique but rather the spiritual and religious depths (or nondepths) of the writers he examines: Blake, Pasternak, Camus, Rimbaud, and others. It is appropriate to subject his poetry to the same kind of reading.

George Kilcourse in *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* carefully traces Merton's Christological development from poetic reflections on the monastic life and his own spirituality to the world beyond Gethsemani, from the poetry of the choir and the poetry of the desert to what Kilcourse calls the poetry of “paradise consciousness” and the poetry of the forest. “Paradise consciousness” is difficult at first to understand, but Kilcourse sees the term as defining an overarching theme of the self in Christ, the new creation in Christ symbolized by “wakeful” child innocence, as in the poem “Grace's House.”

To examine Merton's understanding of the self and the kenotic Christ, the author consistently integrates Merton's prose reflections with his poetry. As Merton moved beyond poetry expressive of his own spirituality and personal experience, he began to write more complex and, to some extent, more urbane poems, their images drawn from a world of sounds and sights far removed from the quiet Kentucky hills and the hymnody of monks. Those sounds must have come to him as bursts of demonic violence, apocalyptic flashpoints unmitigated by human misgivings or the ambiguities of history. His targets are generals, movie stars, newscasts, television, advertisements, electricity, behavioral scientists, slave-traders, cultural pseudoheroes, clergy, presidents—the whole First World. His denunciation of Western im-

perialism and decadence becomes so acerbic at times that his own voice is transformed into retaliatory mimesis, sometimes contributory to the noise he attempts to purge. Kilcourse defends Merton on this count by appealing to biblical parable, poetic irony, and “antipoetry.” But parables work because of their apparent simplicity, and irony works when it cannot be confounded with its target. The “antipoetry” of Merton (and Nicanor Parra, his model for this style of writing) is not a definable genre. It is, as Merton intended it, a nongenre, an unclassifiable discourse, foreshadowing the shattered narratives and fragmentary art forms of postmodernism.

The question is whether or not Merton's resistance to what he perceived as cultural and linguistic collapse reflects kenotic Christology or a subtle dualism, a Barthian abandonment of all but the Other. Kilcourse, in his *Ace of Freedoms*, aligns Merton with classic kenotic Christology, and he uses as evidence Merton's essays, letters, and diaries. Without the prose counterparts, however, is Merton's poetry theologically explicable? Any attempt to examine his last two volumes of poetry without the endnotes and background information (now mercifully available to us) is daunting. It requires an effort not easily described as pleasurable. And the question then becomes not merely aesthetic but pragmatic. What kind of reader response is elicited by poetry that is so discordant at times as to sound frenetic and uncontrolled? Is the kenotic Christ disclosed in decibels this shrill? These are essential questions. In his late poetry Merton elected to empty his figurative language of God, asserting that “our attempts to reveal God to non-believers border on blasphemous idiocy.” A harsh accusation. The attempts of believers may be inept and misdirected, but are they blasphemous and idiotic? That kind of assertion accounts for the sometimes brutal imagery of the Merton who wants to transform and purify poetic diction as well as kerygmatic proclamation. Kilcourse suggests that Merton's distaste for the language and rituals of believers, their “pontifical and organizational routines,” loose talk, and activism was the “brew” for Merton's turn to antipoetry and irony. The believers Merton had in mind were those whom Kilcourse describes as “the custodians of the Christian myths and symbols.” Merton thus positioned himself in a wilderness between the visible institutional Church and nonbelievers. This wilderness is the environment of both *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, his last two poetic volumes. In that emptiness he searched for the hidden Christ.

In the final stanzas of *Cables to the Ace*, as in the tender Cable 78 ("The hidden lovers in the soil become green plants. . ."), Merton's voice becomes gentle, but after seventy-seven sections parodying those aspects of contemporary civilization that appalled him, Merton's isolated moments of poetic hope appear as afterthoughts rather than a discoverable theme. Cable 80 ("Slowly slowly / Comes Christ through the garden. . .") concludes with a vision of the Lord of history weeping "into the fire." Kilcourse's observations that Merton was theologically uncomfortable with any image of Christ that is represented as the defender of a certain order is helpful here, as is Merton's criticism of Michelangelo's Christ in the Sistine Chapel "whipping sinners with his great Greek muscles." The monasticism that saw itself as the guardian of the social order was a spirituality Merton had learned to reject. The poet, therefore, clearly saw himself in these last works as an observer of culture, a kind of post-Eliot garbage collector in a postmodern Waste Land. (We read of his requesting advertisements from *Esquire* from his correspondents.) But if he had not finally touched down again into the waters of peace that still flow even in this world, his Christology would be less evident than his apocalypticism. Even with commentary it is sometimes difficult to discover. Boccaccio, perhaps, would have suggested to Merton that he include at the end of his poetic inferno more hints of eschatological beauty, more suggestions that grace is occasionally visible. Dante had escaped from his own dark forest, and his final declarations of faith and an ecstatic vision of love give his poetry its balance and its power. Merton's turn to the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner, of a Church in diaspora, and a Christ whose power is yet concealed dictated a different approach to kerygma.

Poetry can be the theology of God when it is creative and life giving. Kilcourse's argument is predicated on that thesis, and he argues that the antipoet in Merton was a "constructive identity." He interprets Merton's irony as the literary analogue of *kenosis*. As he is careful to acknowledge, he does so by reading Merton's poetry against his prose essays and letters, citing, for example, an important passage from *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*:

[I]n the heart of anguish are found the gifts of peace and understanding: not simply in personal illumination and liberation, but by commitment and empathy, for the contemplative must assume the universal anguish and the inescapable condition of mortal man.

The author's analysis of Merton's *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* is an immensely helpful explanation of texts that are not otherwise very comprehensible. One does not have to be a literalist or sentimentalist to conclude that Merton's poetry is often less a mosaic than a clutter. The chapter "A Summa of Offbeat Anthropology: Merton's Antipoetry as Christology" is a clear appraisal of the writer's last poetic testaments in terms of theology. And for that reason *Ace of Freedoms* will be an invaluable source of understanding for those who find in Merton a voice crying in the wilderness of modern culture that Christ has emptied himself for us and is even now hidden among the oppressed of the earth.

### III

Donald J. Goergen, O.P.

George Kilcourse has written a stimulating and valuable interpretation of Merton's spirituality as focused on Jesus Christ, "the ace of freedoms," the inner core of that spirituality. I can best be of service to his project by indicating some of its strengths and one of its limitations. I shall mention three of the strengths and then give attention to the limitation, since confronting it will be of more value to Kilcourse.

I myself am not a Merton scholar, although I have been a reader of Merton through the years. The greatest strength of Kilcourse's project is his extensive familiarity with the entire Merton corpus. That means his work must be taken seriously.

A second major strength of *Ace of Freedoms* is the interrelatedness Kilcourse unveils within (1) Merton's spiritual theology of the inner/true self, (2) Merton's image of Christ, and (3) Merton's own autobiographical journey. Merton's own spiritual journey toward his true self is a process of discovering the real Jesus Christ. For Kilcourse, Merton's autobiography is Christology and Merton's Christology is autobiography.

A third strength of Kilcourse's work is his ability to see spirituality as a matrix or source for theology. This point may be controversial. However, as a systematic theologian, I see this as a strength—moving beyond the dichotomy between spirituality and theology that plagues the modern West. Spirituality is theology, and theology is spir-