

# REVIEWS

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Thomas Merton

*"HONORABLE READER":*

*Reflections on My Work*

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

Preface by Harry James Cargas

New York: Crossroad, 1989

ix, 172 pages — \$16.95 clothbound

Reviewed by **Michael Downey**

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The title of this work derives from the celebrated preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What we have in the volume under consideration is an expanded version of *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*, originally published by Unicorn Press in 1981. In addition to the prefaces Merton prepared for foreign editions of his works, editor Robert E. Daggy provides appendices including other material which will undoubtedly be of interest to those already somewhat familiar with Merton studies: (1) a reproduction of the graph Merton used to rank his books from "awful" to "best" (he judged none worthy of placement in the latter category); (2) seven letters in which he discusses proposed translations of his works; (3) a comprehensive list of the various editions and foreign language translations of Merton's works. It may also be of use to note that the preface to *Martha, Mary and Lazarus* is unique to the volume insofar as it was not intended to introduce a translation but a possible English publication.

This is a rather strange sort of book: a group of prefaces, with its own preface by Harry James Cargas. What could possibly be its merits?

That Merton went through many changes in the course of his lifetime is not news. But unlike the others of great religious or literary reputation, Merton never took up his pen to describe specifically how his mind

had changed over the course of a given period. No such personal retrospective exists, and it is difficult to imagine what Merton's would look like had he left one. It is safe to venture, however, that he would not attempt to validate positions presently held by arguing that, at least implicitly, he held them all along.

In lieu of a personal retrospective, *Honorable Reader* may be understood as a collection of some of Merton's "second thoughts," or further reflections. His prefatory remarks often indicate that he had come to see things differently between the time of publication of a given work in English and its later translation into another language.

To enumerate such changes would be to repeat what is already generally recognized by those in Merton studies. What is useful to note is that Merton himself seemed willing to "eat his words" and to acknowledge his embarrassment in the face of some of the things he had written earlier. It may also be instructive to note that Merton did not write these prefaces for works which were "doctored up" before or after translation. With rare exception (i.e., *New Seeds of Contemplation*), Merton allowed his work to stand as originally published, thus allowing the loose ends of his earlier thinking to be exposed, even though his own mind had arrived at points of greater clarity.

There is a second merit to the volume. In addition to the many other "second thoughts" which are disclosed in these pages, Merton admits to his foreign readers that some of the difficulties with his writing stem from his attempt to adopt a style and a voice, or a theological posture, foreign to himself. This he indicates clearly in the prefaces to the French editions of *Exile Ends in Glory* and *The Ascent to Truth*, neither of which, incidentally, received high marks on Merton's "Graph of My Work, Feb. 6, 1967." Though he did not rank *The Ascent to Truth* "awful" on the graph, it is perhaps the clearest example of the problems Merton encountered in attempting to use the scholastic idiom at the expense of his own monastic, existential voice.

We are in Robert Daggy's debt for assembling the prefaces together with the material in the appendices. His own introductory remarks to each of Merton's prefaces are particularly helpful. But greater editorial care might have been taken in this work. There is the usual flurry of typos found in most publications today (the first appears on the first page of Daggy's introduction [p. 3]). A bit more jarring are the footnotes in the preface to the French edition of *Martha, Mary and Lazarus*, while endnotes are provided for the other prefaces. Why break stride? No explanation is offered.

Further, it may have been advantageous to update the editor's introduction (originally published in the 1981 edition of the collected prefaces) before inclusion in this 1989 publication. When Daggy notes the enduring value of Merton's work "more than a decade after his" [Merton's] death in December, 1968" (p. 6), the careful reader notes that this volume appears over two decades after his death, and that much of note has occurred in Merton studies during the second decade.

Those with interest in Merton studies are likely to find little of value in this work. But for those who are close and careful readers of the Merton corpus, this volume will be useful because of the nuances in Merton's thinking which can be discerned in these "second thoughts."

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Thomas Merton

*MONKS POND:*

*Thomas Merton's "Little Magazine"*

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy

Afterword by Brother Patrick Hart

Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1989

xv, 349 pages — \$30.00

Reviewed by **Jonathan Greene**

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In 1965 Thomas Merton realized "a dream deferred" — becoming a hermit, living in a small concrete block building on the edge of a field a short walk from the main buildings at Gethsemani. Far from shutting out the world, these remaining years of his life were his most activist. He thought long and hard about peace and was much concerned with the struggle for racial equality. Living in the midst of a traditional monastic community, he was always interested in the cutting edge of what was happening in the Catholic world, in other religions, in politics, and in the literary and philosophical worlds.

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, the literary world witnessed an explosion in the number of both small presses and "underground" literary