

A THOMAS MERTON SYMPOSIUM

Review of

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Edited by James D. Birchfield

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Reviewed by **James Y. Holloway**

The Kentucky Review (Summer 1987) devoted to Thomas Merton is effective and a pleasure to read. The articles range from David Cooper's account of the monk and the artist Victor Hammer, Kerstin Warner's examination of John Jacob Niles' "turning twenty-two of Merton's poems into art songs" to a look at the poetry by George Kilcourse and Christopher Meatyard's notes on Merton's "Zen Camera." Along the way is an interview with friend and publisher Robert Giroux, Robert Daggy's tale of the lad Merton and "the Bermuda menage" and Lawrence Cunningham's reflection on Merton as theologian. William Marshall concludes with a summary of the Merton Collection at the University of Kentucky. The issue can be read in one sitting, and should be.

Cooper's portrait of two men of intelligence and strong judgments provides insight into Merton and Hammer. We are taken into their conversations and debates about "art" and "tradition," about Hammer's design and printing of Merton's work (the best known are *The Solitary Life* and *Hagia Sophia*) and the gradual but inevitable aesthetic (though never personal) gulf that began in the early 'sixties occasioned by what Cooper describes as "a fundamental personal evolution" reflected in Merton's writings. No longer the contemplative monk, Merton described himself as a "laicized deinstitutionalized anti-ascetic humanist" — again, his temptation to humor and hyperbole became the source for misconceptions that he seemed to enjoy. At any rate, it was the 1960s and "deinstitutionalization" hit Gethsemani as well as the Vatican. Carolyn Hammer was more to the point: "from cowl to blue jeans." Merton followed the artistic innovations. Hammer could not. But the integrity of the two men provided the bond of a great and enduring friendship.

□ **James Y. Holloway** is McGaw Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, and editor of *Katallagete*, a journal which Merton helped to start and in which several of his essays have appeared. Holloway transcribed from tape and edited two of Merton's lectures on William Faulkner — "Time and Unburdening and the Recollection of the Lamb: The Easter Service in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*," *Katallagete* 4 (Summer 1973): pp. 7-15 and "Faulkner Meditations: *The Wild Palms*," *Katallagete* 5 (Summer 1975): pp. 3-14. He is currently at work on a study of Merton's interest in Faulkner, utilizing Merton's extensive holographic notes.

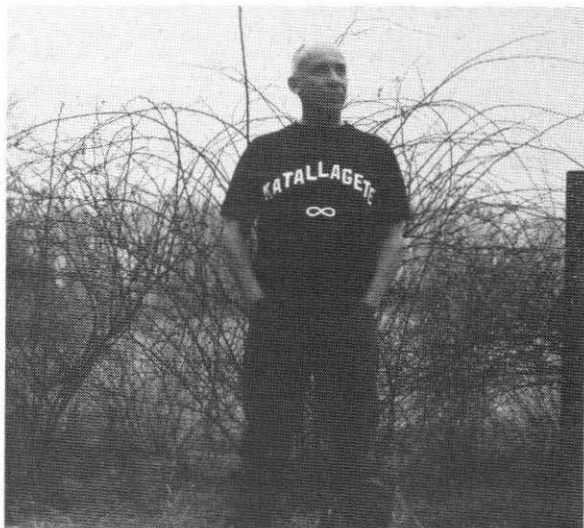
Warner's study of Niles' compositions for Merton's poetry is fascinating even to one like myself, tone deaf and ignorant of musical technique. No doubt it (or some expansion) should accompany performances of the Niles-Merton Songs.

Robert Daggy has provided an important, indeed, essential footnote to the current interest in Merton's "life." I found it one of the two most significant contributions to this collection. It is one thing to have access to "all" available resources, as Daggy does (along with scores of others). It is quite something else to make intelligent use of them, as Daggy records an overlooked episode in Merton's childhood. This skillful and well-written account of Merton's sojourn at Bermuda as a lad of seven or eight comes to a proper and touching conclusion: "The journey away from ourselves and God begins in childhood — for Thomas Merton, specifically, in the Bermuda menage. Only by recovering the child-ness within ourselves, he seems to tell us, a child-ness purged of all poisons, can we start the journey back." This is an important essay which deserves wider circulation.

Victor Kramer's interview with Robert Giroux is bumpy but interesting, anticipating the publication of the written exchanges over four decades. George Kilcourse's essay is a useful summary of critical work on the poetry and strikes its own approach, focusing on the chronological phases that suggest an integrity to the poetry considered as a whole and with the other writings. Christopher Meatyard's relaxed (illustrated!) account of his father, Eugene, and Merton on photography should be read alongside of John Howard Griffin's *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton*.

The gem of the collection is Lawrence Cunningham's "appreciation" of Merton "as a theologian." He takes seriously the assignment to discuss "theologian" as it may or may not apply to Merton, and makes a modest but telling point. Merton "was not a theologian in any obvious sense of the word" but like the monastic writer of the fourth century, Evagrius of Pontus, was "one who speaks of God with the authority of experience" (I would add "and the authority with which Merton held scripture and tradition").

Many are the consequences of the ongoing, indeed escalating interest in Merton since his death twenty years ago. Alas, not all of the consequences are positive. What is more important, however, are not the "disputed" but the "unanswered" questions. Especially needed are studies and assessments of Merton's influence in the life of the Church and the world. Lawrence Cunningham provides suggestions, beginning with Merton's appeal to the American Church, mentioning three areas, "spirituality, social justice, and social criticism," with brief commentaries on each. The essay ought to provide part of the agenda of work (and contemplation!) for the 1988 anniversary. Hopefully, Cunningham will use this all-too-brief reflection as his own starting point. This is a splendid piece of writing.



THOMAS MERTON

In his Green *Katallagete* T-Shirt

Given to Him by James Y. Holloway

Photo by Ralph Eugene Meatyard