

A GENTLE AND GRACIOUS CRITIC

Review of

Victor A. Kramer

THOMAS MERTON: MONK AND ARTIST

Revised Edition of *Thomas Merton* (1984)

Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1988

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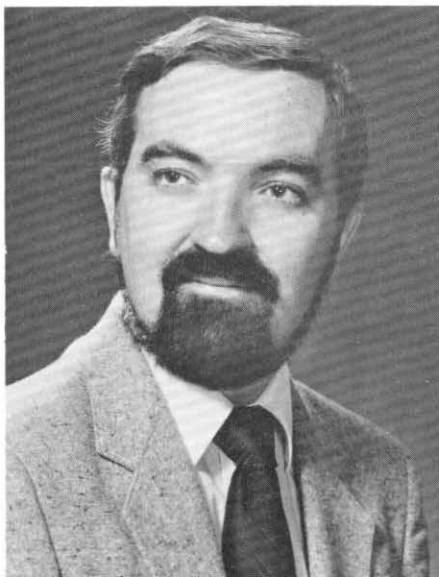
Reviewed by **Michael W. Higgins**

Professor Kramer's book appeared in its first life as *Thomas Merton* in the Twayne United States Authors Series in 1984. The Cistercian Publications edition is expanded and revised but not, it appears, corrected. There are several errors which should have been detected, some of which are: Elliot (Eliot), Houghton (Haughton), Antonia (Antonio), noviate (novitiate), millennialism (millennialism), and others. This is depressing and, more to the point, unnecessary.

I must admit that, generally, it is neither good pedagogy nor good psychology to begin a review with such a sad litany, but such editorial carelessness needs to be highlighted at the outset given that Kramer's work is largely a reprint.

Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist suffers from the formulaic approach favored by Twayne, so Kramer is obliged to provide a healthy measure of summary and paraphrase. Keeping in mind the limitations of such an enterprise, Kramer does an estimable job of outlining the individual items in the formidable Merton canon. He is especially good at divining the various links

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and interdependencies between the prose works and the poetry. But there is little evidence of a searching, critical examination of Merton's writings. Many of Kramer's judgments incline to the banal, although it may well be that a work of such general introduction should opt for the commonplace and tentative over the provocative and bold. But then one need only think of George Woodcock, or Monica Furlong, or Thomas Merton perhaps.

Kramer is right in identifying as pivotal to understanding Merton the sometimes perverse paradox of the silent one's penchant for words. The contemplative-poet tension, or mystic-artist dialectic, is consistently explored by Kramer but he never achieves a satisfactory critical resolution. It is true that Merton's theoretical attempt to resolve the monk-poet tension in his essay, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life" (*Figures for an Apocalypse*) proved unworkable. It did not end his dilemma. Eventually Merton returned to the problem with yet another unsuccessful theoretical effort: "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" published in *Commonweal* in 1958. In both the 1947 article and the 1958 revision Merton labored vainly for a convincing *theoretical* resolution to the tension, even though in poems like "The Sowing of Meaning" and "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist" he achieved a *practical* resolution.

In my opinion, Merton achieves a successful theoretical resolution of the poetry-contemplation problematic with *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, as well as with various of his prose writings, particularly "Message to Poets," "Answers on Art and Freedom," and "Prologo." The clue to the resolution of the problem is found in two sources, one interior and the other exterior. The interior source is Merton's own rejection of the antinomy that obtains between the law of contemplation and the law of action. Once Merton understood contemplation as a necessary dimension in the lives of all men and women, indeed as *the* indispensable guarantor of their freedom, he worked assiduously to restore it to its rightful place in a technocratic and activist society. The exterior source succeeded in rendering the very debate over the precedence of the mystical life vis-a-vis the artistic life superfluous at best. This exterior source consisted of the climate of terror and moral nihilism that Merton saw as devouring U. S. society. Surrounded by a spiritually dissolute society propelled by *thanatos*, Merton cast off the protection of monastic insularity in order to serve a world he had long despised and from which he had initially sought refuge. The immediacy of the world's claim on Merton and the moral urgency of his response gave to his treatment of the mystic-poet debate a new tone and frame of reference — the political. We have the politicizing of the religious poet.

By politicizing I mean the gradual integration of political consciousness with religious sensibility. Political reality is merged with the visionary and no longer dismissed as unhallowed. The traditional opposition of matter and spirit, nature and grace, profane and sacred is superseded by a vision that enjoins a unity of opposites by respecting their natures without naively denouncing one and exalting the other. All matter is holy and all that lives is good. So says William Blake, and so says Thomas Merton.

Kramer's treatment of the monk-artist conflict is more pious than rigorous. He understands the importance of the two "anti-poetic" epics, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, but not their significance, and as a consequence the reader is left with no clear sense of the integrity and complexity of the Merton vision.

Kramer is manifestly a gentle and gracious critic, as witness his various evaluations in the book's "Afterword," and my review, by contrast, might appear niggardly and mean-spirited. I hope not. Clarity and honesty are as valuable in the academy as in the monastery. Merton, I am sure, would agree.