

Critical Turn Ahead!: 1992 in Merton Scholarship and Publication

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Where to begin? And where to end? It makes no difference where I begin, for I shall be there again in time. In my own "raids on the inarticulate," T. S. Eliot's words from the *Four Quartets* have often provided just the right kind of nudge:

"In my beginning is my end."

"In my end is my beginning" ("East Coker")

"We shall not cease from exploration

And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time" ("Little Gidding")

The same lines come to mind when faced with the Mertoniana that continues to appear year by year. Where do I begin in a bibliographic essay of works appearing in 1992, which both anticipates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Gethsemani's most celebrated son, and marks a new era in the Merton legacy?

Is there any end to it? Is it just one thing after another? With Qoheleth I find myself plagued with the haunting suspicion that there is really nothing new under the sun. And I must admit that, at times, I share Dominican Richard Weber's sentiment expressed on the concluding page of the final issue of *Spirituality Today*. Weber wonders: ". . . when does the publishing of Mertoniana end? Where is the point when publishing anything he wrote begins to cheapen his true reputation? Will we have, next year perhaps, the new Merton book: *Whiter and Brighter: The Laundry Lists of Thomas Merton?*" (44/2 [Summer 1992] 200).

I do not judge it to be my task to provide an inventory list of each and every item of 1992 Mertoniana. Nor is it my task to separate wheat from chaff. It is more a matter of recognizing some of the gems in the 1992 Merton collection. No one of them can be appreciated if all are lumped and tangled together.

It is my purpose to single out those strands that I consider to be the more valuable of the lot, not only in terms of their distinctive contribution to the collective Merton fund, but also in terms of how well they will wear in the long run. By way of conclusion I shall suggest what is the most serious challenge that yet awaits us in our common work as students and scholars in the field of Merton studies.

Books

William H. Shannon's *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1992) has received warm reception and appreciative reviews. What Shannon does is tell the now familiar story of Thomas Merton, but with a sharp eye for the contours of Merton's spirituality. Shannon zooms the lens so that Merton the monk is brought into sharp focus, and the author's own contemplative poise yields a picture that many have been anticipating for some time. What we have here is a reflective biography by one who is altogether familiar with Merton the man and monk. The most striking feature of Shannon's work is that he is able to familiarize the reader with the life and times of his subject, inviting to a thoroughgoing appreciation of Merton—as if for the first time. But he does this without ever slipping into the irksome "my chum Tom" idiom, or worse, into the mixed message of some Merton mystagogues: "no-one-outside-the-monastic-life-can-possibly-understand-our-Father-Louis."

One of the more distinctive features of Shannon's work is also the most problematic. The chronologies that are provided at the end of chapters or groups of chapters are not well integrated in view of Shannon's overall aim. The chronologies list significant events and dates in the world at large, together with key events and dates in Merton's own development. These chronological listings are like appendages at the close of chapters. There is no explicit connection made between the chronological data, especially the events taking place in the world at large, and the Thomas Merton story as Shannon tells it.

It might be argued that it is the task of the reader to make such connections. But the reader is left wondering why Shannon deemed certain world events and dates worthy of inclusion in his chronicle, while others were excluded. What is unclear is Shannon's principle of inclusion and exclusion, especially since there seems to be no explicit effort to demonstrate whether and to what degree the events chronicled influenced Thomas Merton and the community at Gethsemani of which he was a part.

Shannon's reflective biography is a book which I would put in the hands of any student or scholar of Thomas Merton. We are, once again, in debt to one who stands at the forefront of Merton scholarship.

Authors often have little to do with the way publishers and booksellers market their work. In much of the publicity that heralded the appearance of *Silent Lamp*, it was set against Mott's work and lauded for not tangling the reader in details. I am still somewhat staggered by the odious comparisons between this book and Michael Mott's *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. Jeune judgments claiming that Mott's work is bogged down with facts and details belie a jaundiced view of a work that is an inestimably valuable source in understanding the Merton story, as well a paradigm of literary grace. They tarnish Mott's exhaustive biography, and slight its singular significance, even if not quite enough of the monastic Merton is mirrored in Mott's pages.

Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings, edited with an introduction by Lawrence Cunningham; foreword by Patrick Hart; preface by Anne E. Carr (N.Y./Mahwah: Paulist, 1992) is the "keeper" of the year. It seems that, as with Shannon, publishing and publicity personnel have had their own way with this book. Cunningham is expert enough to know better than to call this judiciously selected and edited collection *the essential writings*. Yet that is what is claimed. Who decides these things in Mahwah? Or New York?

Without doubt, we have here the most solid, foundational selection of the broad range of Merton's writings to date. We do not really get a taste for Merton's poems here, and that is to be lamented. But what is provided is rich fare, artfully arranged and presented. Cunningham's entrée is in itself worth the price (\$14.95 paperback). Anne E. Carr's preface is exquisite, just as we have come to expect of her. Patrick Hart's foreword provides helpful remarks about the period of Merton's life when he was either master of students or master of novices at Gethsemani (1951-1965). But the real merit of the work lies

in Cunningham's understanding of Merton the master. His understanding of Merton as sapiential theologian and his definition of Merton as a "spiritual master" is perhaps the best hermeneutical stance auditioned thus far in Merton studies. What is also a most delightful surprise is that Cunningham perhaps unwittingly demonstrates that he is himself a master at his craft: a discerning guide; a careful and insightful teacher; a graceful sage of measured word and deep respect for the words and wisdom of another.

The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) is a transcription of two series of talks given during retreats at Gethsemani: the first in December 1967; the second in May 1968. These two retreats at Gethsemani were occasions for contemplative nuns to gather together to discuss with Merton the pressing issues facing religious and contemplative life. It is useful to note that Merton did not seek official permission to meet with the nuns or to give them conferences. Nor did the nuns require or request permission to participate. What we have here, then, is vintage, off-the-cuff-Merton; anything but the domesticated variety. And it is fresh. What Jane Marie Richardson has accomplished in these pages is quite impressive. From audio tapes that are at times barely decipherable, she has provided a clean and sharp rendering of the retreat conferences. Oddly, more of the flesh-and-blood Merton comes through in these pages than in the tapes. Particularly admirable is the way in which Richardson has been able to keep the dialogical character of the retreat conferences. Here we have Merton talking about whatever issue is raised, doing theology on his feet, passing breezy asides about the state of affairs in the Church and religious life, calling for a more prophetic critique on the part of religious and contemplatives vis-à-vis the world of which they are a part. And, of course, he is speaking with women. One would be hard pressed to detect even a hint of nascent Mertonian feminist consciousness in these pages. And to the editor's credit, she does not pretend that there was one. But for any thorough understanding of Merton on the contemporary renewal of religious and contemplative life, this book is a real treasure, handsomely produced.

Thomas M. King's *Thomas Merton: Mystic at the Center of America* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press/Michael Glazier Books, 1992 [vol. 14, *The Way of the Christian Mystics*]) promises more than it delivers. In this work, King provides a helpful study of Merton on "the self,"

"contemplation," "freedom," and "others." In many respects he covers much the same ground as Anne E. Carr's splendid study, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*. Some of King's investigations of Merton's understanding of different types of prayer and contemplation are instructive. But the book seems to work against itself partly because the terms "prayer," "contemplation," and "mysticism" are used without a great deal of precision. What is nowhere to be found in these pages is a clear explanation of what the author means by the term "mysticism" and, more importantly, just how Merton may be understood as a mystic. King's work takes up themes already raised in Raymond Bailey's ponderous study of Merton on mysticism, in John J. Higgin's early investigation of Thomas Merton's theology of prayer, and in William H. Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*.

Much more needs to be said about Merton the mystic. Before the conversation can proceed to anyone's advantage, however, more terminological clarification is in order. Merton did not use the term mystic or its cognates with any great regularity, particularly in reference to himself. Further, Merton did not tell us much about his own experience of prayer. In this he differs from Teresa of Jesus, John of the Cross, or Elizabeth of the Trinity and others who provide descriptions of their mystical experience. A Fourth and Walnut epiphany does not a mystic make, at least not in the classical sense of the term. But such an experience does provide as good a starting point as any for a discussion of Merton the mystic. Or Polonnaruwa. Neither one is treated in King's work. Not even given a nod. It is also quite striking that King pays little attention to Merton's poetry. If there are veins of mysticism to be mined in the Merton corpus they lie in the poems, especially the antipoetry of the later years. George Kilcourse has consistently and effectively examined the poetry as a source for understanding Merton's spirituality. His *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), a carefully crafted study of Merton's Christology, is the first critical systematic theological investigation of Merton's poetry.

Because of the questions King's book raises, it is my hunch that it will provide stimulus for further serious critical investigation, not of Merton on prayer or contemplation or mysticism, but of Merton the mystic. This is fruitful terrain, especially in view of David Cooper's carefully argued, though by no means universally accepted thesis that

Merton failed as a mystic (see David D. Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* [Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989], ch. 6, "Failed Mysticism," 166-91). Future forays into the landscape of Merton's mysticism will be greatly enriched by the ongoing work of Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (vol. 1, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* [N.Y.: Crossroad, 1991]), who maintains that the central category governing discourse about mystical experience in the Christian tradition is not "union" but "presence."

Book Chapters

In *Spiritual Guides for Today* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1992) Annice Callahan devotes a chapter to "Thomas Merton: A Living Mystery of Solitude," 97-116. This is a helpful little introduction to the life and spirituality of Thomas Merton. Useful for undergraduate courses, Callahan situates Merton alongside five other twentieth-century spiritual guides, three Roman Catholics, one Jew, one Anglican. Callahan's strong suit is also something of a handicap. Her writing is straightforward, direct. This is very helpful in working with undergraduate students who tend to value clarity and precision in expression. But when taken either in part or as a whole, Callahan's writing is a bit clipped. The style is staccato. The reader is provided with basic, reliable information. But the net effect is that we have just skimmed the surface. But in teaching Merton to college or university students, Callahan's work will serve as a fine primer.

Conrad C. Hoover's, "Going Deep into the Truth: Thomas Merton and Spiritual Direction in a Cross-Cultural Context," in *Common Journey, Different Paths: Spiritual Direction in Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (ed. Susan Rakoczy [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992] 67-77) is worthy of note. His exposé is built on Merton's conviction that the contemplative experience is already embedded in the traditions of all peoples. He contends that we can do nothing more helpful than to help others uncover their own proper identity and destiny as they come to know the Christ dwelling within. While Hoover does not say much about Merton the spiritual guide that has not been said before, the fact that he brings his insights on spiritual direction to bear upon a much wider cross-cultural conversation advances the discourse about Merton a significant step in the right direction.

Varia

There are a few other items worthy of note. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (revised edition with foreword by Patrick Hart; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992 [Originally published in Britain and U.S., 1977]). This collection of essays takes up issues pertinent to monastic, solitary, and contemplative living. Written during his later years, these articles are expressive of Merton's more mature reflections on the monastic vocation.

Merton: A Film Biography, produced by Paul Wilkes/Audrey L. Glynn is now more accessible and available in a more affordable video cassette (First Run Features. 153 Waverly Place. New York, N.Y. 10014).

It should also be noted that the French-born New Yorker Thomas Merton was judged worthy to be included in the encyclopedia published to mark Kentucky's bicentennial. See the entry by Robert E. Daggy, "Thomas Merton," in *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, ed. John E. Kleber (Lexington, Ky.: The University of Kentucky Press, 1992).

Perhaps one of the more noteworthy developments is that Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* is now available on audio cassette (read by Sidney Lanier; abridged by Jacob Needleman and John Hunt/Spiritual Classics on Cassette [Berkeley: Audio Literature, 1992]; two cassettes). Such a recording will be of inestimable value to the visually impaired, the elderly, the infirm. It should also receive a warm reception by those who have welcomed the renaissance of "listening in" which has been occasioned by the advent of "A Prairie Home Companion," "Radio Reader," and other such audio programs.

The Need for a Critical Turn

At the close of the first twenty-five years of Merton studies, it may be appropriate to suggest some of the tasks that yet await us in our common work. Above all else it seems that the most pressing task is to connect the discourse within the circle of Merton studies with the discourse in other fields. We need to make room for a greater variety of voices in our ongoing conversations, even and especially those voices which might seem to interrupt and unsettle commonly held perceptions about Merton the man and the monk. Merton *aficionados* need an *aggiornamento*. The windows need to be opened, new light thrown on the subject, fresh air breathed into our lungs, new blood let flow

through our veins. Much of the Merton conversation is claustrophobic, a bit like "*deja vu* all over again."

A new generation of Merton scholars will have different perspectives and a different task. Their work will not primarily be that of making the literary legacy of Thomas Merton available to an ever widening circle of readers. It is rather more a task of bringing a heightened critical hermeneutic to bear on the life and legacy of one who no doubt will stand up well under the most rigorous constructive critique. What is being suggested here is not that a cadre of insensitive smart allecks try to air Merton's dirty laundry. Rather it is to suggest that if the conversation around Merton is to be brought to a new plateau, a far greater measure of constructive critique is called for.

It is now more commonly recognized that the Merton circle is really quite small. Its canons tend to be narrow. They are implied rather than explicit. Studies of Merton that veer away from the hagiographical tend to be shunned. Consider the cool reception given David Cooper's astonishing study of Merton. Even if Cooper may not have a feel for Merton's monastic matrix, he volunteers a brave and refreshing critical interpretation of Merton, based on Merton's own writings, rather than on the lore. We need more critical studies like his. And Anne Carr's. Or George Kilcourse's. These critical investigations signal the direction where the studies will be moving in the next generation of Merton scholarship if Merton is to continue to speak from age to age.

In conclusion, I should like to provide an example of a critical question that has yet to be brought to bear on the Merton corpus in any rigorous or systematic fashion. If all Christian spirituality is *ipso facto* Trinitarian, why is it that there is so little explicitly Trinitarian language in Merton's writings? Since the affirmation of God as triune is central and essential to Christian faith, why do Merton's writings seem to rely so little on explicit Trinitarian symbolism? (*Pace*, William Koch's research on pneumatology in Merton's canon, a study pertinent to the Trinitarian theme). It is conceivable that there is a particular way that Merton perceived the basic truth that the doctrine seeks to articulate, but that he expresses it in a way that requires skillful and careful translation. Or it may be that the prevailing Christian doctrine of God had in Merton's time so marginalized the Trinitarian dimension (because of its esoteric and speculative character) that he gravitated toward a more generic Christocentric monotheism. But because it is to be ex-

pected that authentic Christian faith and spirituality in some way reflect the particularities of symbols and events of Christian faith, the seeming absence of reliance on Trinitarian, as well as pneumatological, language and symbolism in Merton's writings on Christian life is an area awaiting rigorous, critical investigation.