

Cultural Resistance and Literary Identity: Merton's Reading Notebooks

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This is my place and yet I have never felt so strongly that I have "no place" as I have felt here since becoming fully reconciled to this as "my place." My place is in reality no place, and I hesitate to act as if I were anything but a stranger anywhere, but especially here. I am alien to everything, even contemplation, even writing.¹

Examining Merton as a reader, not just as a writer, contributes to a better understanding of the ways in which his work anticipated later debates among deconstructionists, post-structuralists, as well as neo-feminists and critical theorists engaged in weighing the aesthetic values of the Western Christian literary tradition and its impact on culture.² The many critical perspectives of the late capitalist era question not only the authority of books generally, but, more profoundly, debate the reader's relationship to the Author of sacred books. Interestingly, Merton's working notebook entries about his spirituality of reading anticipate this development. His approach to language was existential, and presupposed the central problem of modernism: that readers' "identity" is the chief source for imposing meaning not originally intended by an author. In a philosophy of reading developed by neo-feminist writers, philosophers and theologians, one finds a similar critical approach. It is therefore valuable to regard Merton within the

1. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine Bochen, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993) 29, Letter from Thomas Merton to Jacques Maritain, February 22, 1960.

2. David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

mainstream of the Western Christian literary tradition, in the context of the American literary canon, and within the macro-story that forms the basis for many late-twentieth-century narrative strategies articulated by critical theorists.

Two streams of argument in postmodern criticism exist about the truth of biblical books: one is logocentric, or fundamentalist, while the other is event-centered or gnostic.³ The major contribution, however, has come from women, who argue that the meta-narrative which constitutes the Western Christian literary tradition is androcentric, or male-centered, and therefore culturally determined. Among neo-feminists in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, contemporary writers are reassessing the meaning of sacred books associated with patriarchal culture, including the Old Testament, Koran and Torah.⁴ Whereas earlier waves of feminism discussed how culture undermines the Feminine principle in the world, the current trend is to restore ancestral texts through their reinterpretation. While "classical" feminism concerned itself with freeing the human spirit and gaining civil rights, the modern media persisted in its construction of a female prototype rooted in material consumption and in images of the body, distorting the spirituality of self-determinism, individuality and cultural transcendence that linked feminism historically with other utopian ideologies of the modern and postmodern era.⁵

In addition to critical theories, new typologies have emerged from the language of social science: "mediated" texts possess cultural "agency," words are regarded not as truth but as facts; they have a "social life." The quality of a text as cultural agent, whether it is oppres-

3. Jeffrey, 140-7.

4. Ursula King, ed. *Feminist Theology from the Third World*. (London: SPCK/Orbis Press, 1994); *Religion and Gender* (Oxford & Cambridge, Blackwell, 1995).

5. Claire Badaracco, "Utopian on Main Street," in *Rethinking Religion, Media and Culture* (Sage: 1997); Alicia Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (London: Blackwell, 1993).

The most recent development of this trend in literature may be judged the third or fourth wave of feminism in the twentieth century. Among the classic literature that the movement produced are such benchmarks as Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Women's Bible* (1895), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* (1962), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) among many others. All challenged the literary "canon" as androcentric, and positioned feminism squarely within mainstream modernism.

sive or liberating, is not a quality inherent in the language itself, but in the interactive power that exists between the text and its reception by a reader. Communication scholars offer propositions of a "reception theory," that all public texts—and that could apply to scripture contained in ancient, sacred printed books, or scripts for the secular media—are "enacted," able to silence, corrupt, free or transform, to the degree they are able to engage believers.⁶ Without readers, texts have no life, no meaning and no power. Agency in language is pivotal to the problem of resistance and identity in Merton's notebooks. Entries about his reading anticipate later articulation of the same principles by several later critical schools, few of which are Christian in philosophy. In Merton's framework, on one extreme stands the principle of "selfhood and identity" and on the other is the principle of "alterity" or discernment, where the self could be "the outsider" or Merton's "no one." In a reading notebook for 1963, he observed,

Rain battering down on the tin roof. Cornpicker far over there roaring in the rain (no comment!). Two pine trees, among many cedars, on top of the rise across the hollow. Red sage grass & pale greyish yellow mud. Suppose nobody were here to see it. Perhaps nobody is. To realize that the "I" who sees is no one, & that there is "no one" here. or rather: "No one" is here! The one who reads this will be no one. Or if it is "someone," then what he reads is entirely different from what is written. He reads what he himself would have written. - whoever he may be! But if he is no one then he can read what I have written [.] As if emptiness could be a possession!⁷

Popular success in the genre of spiritual autobiography lies less in how an individual escapes the trap of culture, than in how an individual articulates a universal self, striking chords in the cultural memory or imagination in the collective identity. Throughout Merton's life, his resistance to what he termed the "collapse of culture" and his alienation from the destructiveness synonymous with post-war modernity explains why the monk's confessional autobiography and spiritual journalism became an American publishing *best-selling* phenomenon.

6. J. Martin-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From Media to Mediations* (London: Sage, 1993); Seyla Benhabib and Judith Butler, et al. "Feminism and Postmodernism: Subjectivity, Historiography, and Politics," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 17-34, 107-26.

7. Reading Notebook #13, n.p. [12] Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

In his literary essays and poetry, Merton defined alienation in modern literature as inseparable "from culture . . . from life in society."

Alienation begins when culture divides me against myself, puts a mask on me, gives me a role I may or may not want to play. Alienation is complete when I become completely identified with my mask, totally satisfied with my role, and convince myself that any other identity or role is inconceivable. The man who sweats under his mask, whose role makes him itch with discomfort, who hates the division in himself, is already beginning to be free.⁸

Merton's ability to capture and express the temper of his times also suggests why so many men returning from World War II sought another peace in the swelling ranks of the Trappist monasteries between 1946 and the mid-1950s.

Alienation is integral to Thomas Merton's theology of creativity: in deconstructing the false self, he uncovered his likeness to the image of God, the source of his true freedom.⁹ As Merton resisted the conformist expectations of the material culture of the fifties by entering monastic life, he resisted spiritual domination by his religious superiors in the monastery:

I have renounced 12th century France. That is I have given up accepting the 12th century spiritual climate as a practical reality for myself & for my community. Certainly I love it & am at home in it. . . . but I remain in the 20th century with a special obligation to my contemporaries - & to myself as "contemporary."¹⁰

He lived long enough to rethink his infatuation with the political resistance movements of the sixties, saying that "the peace movement is exactly the sort of thing I am protesting against.—the rationalistic & utilitarian spirit." In his reading notebook for 1966, Merton admitted that he saw his job as "to get loose from the mental tangle I got in by wanting too much to identify myself with a particular movement & with groups in it."¹¹

8. Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart, "Why Alienation is for Everybody" (New York: New Directions, 1981) 381.

9. *The Literary Essays*, 368.

10. Reading Notebook #13, 13. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

11. Reading Notebook #17, 37. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

Since the time of Merton's death, postmodern critical themes have been sharply articulated by women who use both the autobiographical and confessional modes associated with the Western Christian literary tradition to express resistance both to the material secular culture that commodifies them, and to the patriarchal religious culture that turns their biblical identity into a political problem. To throw out the inheritance of sacred books, though, is to compound the errors of the patriarchy, according to women's arguments. Ample evidence exists that the contemporary restoration of ancestral or sacred texts, and their reinterpretation through exegesis is occurring in all religions and in undeveloped regions as well as in first world countries. This can be attributed to global democratization and increased economic power among even the world's poorest women. Further, women's resistance to patriarchal culture is rooted in their interpretation of the failure of postmodern material culture to offer them a significant alternative reality. A philosophy of reading as a political act emerges from the syncretic drive that the poet Alicia Ostriker attributes to women alone, yet it would seem also to apply to Merton:

Instead of Image we possess Word. An alternative beauty bursts into existence, through the language of the stutterer Moses. It is a triumph of Language . . . for are we not commanded by the text itself to interrogate, to engage in dialogue with each other, with the text, with God?¹²

The integration of the Feminine principle in Merton's spirituality also proved an important counter to the cultural masks modernism imposed. In a world which overadulated strength by force, monastics sang psalms to the Virgin Mary to express the sweetness they imagined as their own spiritual identity, which the world denied in its reality. From Merton's deliberate separation from culture, his resistance even to the imposed spiritual regulations in the monastery, emerged his spirituality of alternating resistance and submission. "The only genuine spiritual life is generated here by reactions against this spirit [of enforced stability and immobility]. . . ."¹³ Reading played a large part in that pattern of resistance and submission. The text was the conversion process through which he captured whom he might become, in nature and in Christ.

12. Ostriker, 50.

13. Reading notebook #17, 51. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

As Merton's seventy (plus) working notebooks demonstrate, his reading ultimately transformed his alienation, integrating it as part of the surface of the text, while his writing led him into a further resistance to the cultural masks that the identity of a writer imposed. His reading notebooks between 1959 and 1966 record that he read some classics of monasticism, but more often books published within the year. In 1959, for example he read Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1958), Marie-Dominique Chenu's *La Theologie au douzieme siecle* (1958), a 1957 biography of Martin Heidegger, Rollo May's *Existence* (1958), Henry Bars, *Maritain en Notre Temps* (1959), Giulio Basetti-Sani, *Mohammed et Saint Francois* (1959), Victor Frankl's *From Death Camp to Existentialism* (1959), Abraham Heschel's *Between God and Man* (1959), as well as earlier imprints by Suzuki on Buddhism, and Ananda Coomarasawmy. The notebook dated 1959 also indicates he read Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (1961), Gerhard Von Rad's *Old Testament Theology* (1962), Walter Millis and James Real's *The Abolition of War* (1963). His reading notes at the end of 1965 and beginning of 1966 indicate a broadening taste for the classics and a diminishing intensity to keep up with recent releases, though he read the W. W. Norton contemporary translations of Rainer Maria Rilke (1962) within two years of publication. All this indicates not only the intellectual appetite of the reader, but explains how the cloistered writer was able to articulate the temper of the times. In addition to his many friendships with writers, Merton kept up with what the creative world was saying, despite his protest against the other destructive essence of modern culture.

For Merton, reading was close to meditation and remained part of an interior life. In his notebook he confessed,

Perhaps I write to slow down my reading & reflect more. . . . In the hermitage I read much more slowly, take more time, cover less ground. In the morning, with two & a half hours of reading, I still read very little, & the time is gone like a half hour. There is no quantitative estimate of this time. It is simply a "period of reading" with its own quality.¹⁴

The popularity of Merton's writing—including those works commissioned as promotional tracts for the monastic life—served as another source of temptation, to build a "false self" in need of decon-

14. Reading notebook #17, 51. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

struction. "I am still publishing far too much of everything. I am hoping that this will be the last "three book" year," he wrote in a letter to Mark Van Doren.¹⁵ In contrast to his guilt and estrangement from the publicity machinery that turned his personal revelations into popular public texts and made him a well-known author, Merton's reading led him beyond preoccupation with his identity as a monk and as a writer.

Among the contemporary writers who have contributed to the emerging body of literature about women's identity and alienation from material and from patriarchal culture, even the landscape can participate in a transcendental conversation with the reader. This can lead the self out of the morass of identity or culture, as several contemporary writers, including Annie Dillard, Kathleen Norris, Patricia Hampl and other "spiritual journalists" demonstrate, citing Merton often in their respective works.¹⁶

Three main principles—"selfhood," "agency" and "alterity"—form the basis of the neo-feminist critical approach. First, the principle of "selfhood" or identity suggests that a reader looks into a text for an aspect of the self otherwise unavailable in reality; rather, personal identity is found in the mimetic power of the word. Secondly, the transformative power of a text takes shape in the principle of its "agency:" that is, words constitute a reality beyond personal identity imposed by ideas of a false self in culture—they are a way out. The "agency" of a literary text lies in its power to draw the reader in, as well as to lead the reader out, to discover a new identity within the culture of an imaginative world. Thirdly, the principle of "alterity" explores the vantage point of the writer as an outsider. In this way, the creative writer tries to put into words the reality of what is not the self, ultimately disengaging from both word and culture a balance that the critical voice strives to achieve. In "alterity" is embeded the idea of reading as an interactive performance with a text. More concretely, the values of religious scripture are performed in worship, reading or preaching. These acts give life to subgenres, including "testimony," "witness," "call" "homiletic" and "journey."¹⁷ The spirituality of writers

15. Thomas Merton to Mark Van Doren, February 24, 1966, Columbia University Archive.

16. Claire Badaracco, "Animated Outsiders," *Merton Annual* 8, 1996, 150-61; see also "Utopian on Main Street."

17. M. Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); Wolff, J, *Resident Aliens: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

tends to be "intensified" rather than "dissipated by independence from dogma," and the spiritual freedom to re-imagine the Feminine at the center rather than on the periphery of a sacred drama, drives a "syncretism" rather than a separatism from traditional textual interpretation and its inherent moral lessons.¹⁸

Following three decades of theological arguments for the restoration of women's presence in biblical history by Elizabeth Fiorenza, Elaine Pagels and many other theologians in the past decade, a global philosophy of resistance among religious women of many faiths and ethnic groups has developed. Rebecca Goldstein, for example, reads Lot's wife, Irit, as an allegory about obedience to God's will and "the demands of transcendence and the backward pull of love and accidental attachment." What motivated Lot's wife to look back? Goldstein speculates that it wasn't voyeurism, nostalgia or disobedience, but a desire to be united with her children. Lot's wife looked back because she wanted to see if her daughters were following, and was so grief-stricken at their fate, she desired to join them. God's act, in her view, was an act of mercy, not retribution.¹⁹

For the writers Cynthia Ozick, Marcia Falk, and Margaret Ann Doody, the Old Testament figure of Hannah is not about maternity, but about conformity, self-assertion and identity. Hannah moved civilization forward by "inventing" inward prayer, according to Ozick. She reads the exchange between Hannah and her husband Elkanah who questions her, "Why weepest thou?" when he sees her lips moving in Temple and thinks her drunk, as the "first principle of feminism," that every human being should be treated as an end rather than a means, and in Hannah is the transcendence of assigned roles by religious authorities. Marcia Falk's reading of Hannah is consistent with Ozick's, though she reads Hannah as a prototype for changing inaudible, invisible prayer into a communal voice that included everyone, a "truly inclusive, spiritual community," and a "community of equals." Hannah's triumph, according to Falk's reading, is not in bearing successfully the son she longs for, but in resisting cultural barriers to internalizing her prayer. Margaret Ann Doody's reading of Hannah also

18. Sheila Briggs, "Buried With Christ," *The Politics of Identity and the Poverty of Interpretation*, in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (New York: Blackwell, 1990).

19. Rebecca Goldstein, "Looking Back at Lot's Wife," in C. Buchman & C. Spiegel (Eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett, 1994) 3-12.

explores the classic nature of the text and its connection to the "lost child recovered" theme in Greek drama. Because Hannah lives up to her promise to give Samuel back to God through service to the temple, he is a man, according to Doody, "cut off from the feminine" and is condemned to regard all other women as substitute mothers for the one he lost. As a child of the temple, he is burdened by becoming the ultimate insider who thinks holiness unremarkable; he has been raised to think it routine, his right. He exists, Doody imagines, in a "state of superb latency," having been raised "Peter-Pan like, without parents." Samuel sits in the heart of the sacred shrine but lives without feelings of dread, awe or excitement about his privilege. He never has experienced a state of "alterity," being on the perimeter, in exile, excluded.²⁰

The social role of the spiritual outsider, estranged from culture, is the spiritual formation for the critic. (Did any critical intelligence in Christian literary history ever emerge from one who "belonged"?) Poet Kathleen Norris reads the book of Psalms as a celebration of "alterity," of living on alien soil, because it leads to a deepening of spiritual life. In an off-Broadway production, the dramatist Elizabeth Swados styled Job as a clown, the ultimate outsider, the loser. Patricia Hampl read the story of Jonah as a lesson in the consequences of human separation, from one another, and from God. Jonah, according to Hampl, told his fellow sailors that he worships Yahweh, but he "talks to God as if he were a rival author, part of the competition, ever a book ahead of him."²¹ The heart of the Western Christian literary tradition is the struggle to throw off the ideological implications in the religious imagination, and to reimagine and reinterpret with each reading the individual reader's relationship to the Word. Like Merton, therefore contemporary women writers seek to discover a language within the "mediated" material culture (one that results from the pervasive influence of celluloid and digitized images) that has the potential to be common and utopian, global and particular, relevant to secular society and to sacred scripture.

20. Cynthia Ozick, "Hannah and Elkanah: Torah the Matrix for Feminism," 88-93 and Marcia Falk, "Reflections on Hannah's Prayer" 94-102 and Margaret Ann Doody, "Infant Piety and the Infant Samuel," 103-22, in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett, 1994).

21. Kathleen Norris, "The Paradox of the Psalms," 221-233 and Patricia Hampl, "In the Belly of the Whale," 289-300, in C. Buchman & C. Spiegel (Eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett, 1994).

Resistance, then, is central to reading as an active spiritual endeavor, for Merton in his time, and for neo-feminist writers today. If identity is a spiritual construction rather than a political or psychological one, the connections between generations of believers, and even within the "selves" of one individual writer, become increasingly the work of the religious imagination, individualized by each writer. This realization gives a power to the text that is transformative and conversational, which possesses respectively the power of agency, to pull together a community of outsiders, who share an understanding that whatever else they might not be, they have in common a distance from the world.

Merton's observation in his reading notebook for 1965 demonstrates his immersion in the values of the televisual age despite his distance from the world, and his sacralization of the imagination's ability to soar beyond its earth-bound limits, to reinterpret the possibilities of alterity, and in doing so revolutionize the identity of the modern self. He wrote,

Liturgy of the space age—participation of everyone in space flights by tv. seeing the man hanging around moving like a fish in the void[.] I am excluded from all this, & I am not sure that it is so wonderful to merely "not see" & not be with it. It is a kind of poverty, perhaps senseless, perhaps useful. We get newspaper pictures of it on the bulletin board. From the beginning man has wanted to fly. See Eliadi on Shamanism. The ascension. The flight of Mohammed. Now [is] this fabulous achievement wasteful? The highest expression of liturgy is waste—sacrifice[.] There has to be this waste & this display (but don't go & condemn the splendor of Cluny etc—which was more justified on the same grounds!)²²

Merton in his time accomplished what contemporary neo-feminists seek to accomplish today—not to find their identity in a text, but to associate with the images evoked in their imagination of their absence from the text, or to imagine their transcendence of the world of the text as a means of being, in their own place and time, their existence part of their larger "task or *auftrag*," as Merton phrased it, of the "suffering that informs the moral imperative of life."²³

22. Reading Notebook #16, 51. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

23. Reading Notebook #16, 51. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

Women readers seem to ask, "What good is suffering if it does not lead to response to suffering?" Merton would have argued that "Without resistance to what is, there is neither purpose nor task in suffering, but only a passivity." Undoubtedly, contemporary critical theorists also would argue against any passive reception of texts by a reader, because to do something other than resist or talk back to the text would be to deny the readers' autonomy and authority.

Not only does current critical theory imply an active spiritual resistance to all norms and unexamined beliefs that have been inherited as part of culture, but it also suggests that one must throw off alienation itself as cultural baggage. Whatever distance between readers' belief and the text that is implied by the concept of alienation must somehow be replaced: rejection and resistance are not synonymous. Merton commented in his reading notebook,

"I think my writing is split in two categories as regards this question. "The world" seen in terms of nature, of manual work, of literature, culture, Asian philosophy etc etc is fully *accepted*. Also "man" in his historic reality. What is not accepted—the "world" in its contemporary confusions. I have not faced technological society & the crises of maladjusted man in a culture which develops too fast for him. I tend to reject it & curse it. To foresee nothing but doom for it. There may be some truth in my pessimism, but the pessimism itself has an evil root, & instead of getting the root out I have been cultivating it in the name of "spirituality" or what you will. This is no longer honest. My task is to come to terms *completely* with the world in which I love & of which I am a part, because this is the world redeemed by Christ—even the world of Auschwitz. But how "come to terms" with Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the American South? Surely there can be no compromise with them. Yet they too must be "redeemed." The great task of redemption is in America which imagines itself Christian! That is why I am here, & must stay here."²⁴

The philosophical problem that Merton and contemporary women writers have in common is not alienation from the surrounding materialism of "the world," but how to love the world, to be in it but not of it, ready to change it through the power of words. The writer Allegra Goodman observed that, "The prophets do not speak in a vacuum:

24. Reading Notebook #16, 53. Merton Archives, Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College.

they raise their voices in a specific culture, and like all artistic expression, their language is grounded in particular social circumstances." Elizabeth Rosen concludes similarly that reading has instructed her in the "extent to which the era in which one lives determines what one sees in a biblical text and how that is further modified by who does the reading."²⁵

So all reading of sacred texts filters historical, political, and cultural analysis to determine meaning. The Bible is not a newspaper. The book is a collection of stories about events, not facts. If God is in the events, their "revelation" or larger meaning in each culture is the task for the reader, not the journalist, critic or historian. Each reader's response to the Word is another spiritual autobiography, another confession. The post-modern critical theorist would argue that all texts endure across cultures and over time: words have lives of their own. The power of words, or their "agency" lies in how readers activate the meaning inherent in the stories: how they aspire to change their own identity, or to change church, society, material culture, the world, the Other from which they stand alone and apart because they picked up a book, read it, and found in it something sacred.*

25. Allegra Goodman, "Prophecy and Poetry," 301-9 and Elizabeth Rosen, "Rebekah and Isaac: A Marriage Made in Heaven" 13-26, in C. Buchman & C. Spiegel (eds.), *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible* (New York: Fawcett, 1994).

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