

Thomas Merton as Modernist Critic: The Influence of T. S. Eliot

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Writing in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton recalls his introduction to T. S. Eliot: "I heard about T. S. Eliot from the English Master at Oakham who had just come down from Cambridge and read me aloud 'The Hollow Men.'" ¹ The year was 1928, and the English master was Frank C. Doherty. In 1931, Merton mentions reading Eliot while a student at Columbia. Although Merton later sold his personal copies of Eliot's works to a Columbia bookstore as a sign of protest against what he called "artiness," his interest in Eliot persists. In 1948 as a monk at Gethsemani Abbey, he notes reading "East Coker" and appreciating Eliot: "This time I like him a lot" (*ibid.*, 170). In his lectures to the monks, he refers to Eliot as a difficult writer. Michael Mott calls our attention to the similarities between Eliot's "What the Thunder Said" and Merton's poem, "Elias—Variations on a Theme," written in 1957. ² Mott's observation suggests that Merton's interest in Eliot in this instance has become indebtedness. Moreover, it should be noted that since Eliot's poetry and criticism dominated the literary scene from 1920 through 1950, it would have been difficult for Merton, a man of letters concerned with contemporary literature, to remain unaware of him.

Throughout Merton's correspondence of the 1960s his interest in Eliot is evident. In 1964, Merton remarks to Dame Marcella Van

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948) 80.

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton, 1984) 303.

Bruyn his plan to read "Little Gidding" on his fiftieth birthday.³ The following year he refers to *Murder in the Cathedral* in a letter to Father Charles Dumond.⁴ When in 1967 Nancy Fly Bredenberg, a Vassar student, writes to Merton inquiring about the influences on his writing, Eliot is included in the gallery of writers Merton cites.⁵ It is evident that Eliot's presence in one form or another continued to reassert itself throughout Merton's life.

Other modernists influenced Merton. There was the literary environment at Columbia, where modernist theory, better known as the New Criticism, flourished at the time Merton was a student there. Undoubtedly the English program had a lasting effect on Merton, for his later commentary on the Joycean critics, "News of the Joyce Industry," reveals a deep understanding of modernist methodology. There was also the influence of John Crowe Ransom, whose book *The World's Body* Merton reviewed. Ransom's work demonstrated for Merton the application of modernist theory to individual works. These, to name a few, contributed to Merton's understanding of modernist theory. However, it is on Eliot's influence that I wish to focus here. Examination of Merton's essays and commentaries establishes Eliot's influence in shaping Merton's critical approach to literature. To understand this influence, let us consider their views on the following: (1) the nature and function of poetry and (2) the relationship between literature and religion. (When discussing the latter subject, Eliot and Merton prefer the more inclusive term "literature" to "poetry," thereby encompassing all works of the creative imagination. Throughout this paper I shall attempt to follow their practice.)

It should be noted at the outset that neither Eliot nor Merton left a formal theory of literary criticism. There is no single document containing a set of critical principles. Instead, their theory emerged over approximately forty years, evolving from the study of individual writers. Eliot chose to publish many of his essays in several volumes during his lifetime. Patrick Hart's edition of Merton's literary essays remains the best available collection at this time. Both Eliot and Merton acknowledge the tenuous nature of literary criticism. As writers themselves they recognize the danger lurking in criticism, namely, that

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, 1989) 205.

4. *Ibid.*, 293.

5. *Ibid.*, 361.

it can be self-serving. Critics in their rush to justify their work can advocate a theory that reflects their own practices. Moreover, both Eliot's and Merton's sensibility is experiential, emerging not from absolute standards but evolving as their humanistic, moral, and religious views evolve. Their sensibility and the criticism it informs is subject to the vagaries of human experience, among which are vagueness, attitudinal changes, and even inconsistencies. For this reason it is important to identify when possible the dates of individual statements, a practice Eliot indicated is necessary and one I observe throughout this paper. In the case of Merton these circumstances eventuate not a coherent whole but random critical fragments connected by an informed and developing mind. One wishing to understand his theory must construct it piece by piece. This task when pursued yields a theory of literary criticism whose underpinnings establish Eliot as one of Merton's mentors. Thereafter, Merton, guided by his unique experience as a man of letters and a monk, builds upon Eliot's ideas, eventually formulating his own theory in the same way one architect might elaborate upon another's basic structure.

Eliot struggled with the nature of poetry before accepting a poem or any literary work as an autonomous entity. In "Tradition and Individual Talent," first published in 1917 and included in the *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*, he perceives the poet's mind as a receptacle where thoughts and feelings coalesce before emerging in a poem as images and phrases. At this time Eliot defines a poem as a fusion of elements, inexplicable because their relationship is unclear. In 1920, disputing a theory of poetry expounded by a popular critic, Eliot argues against the notion that "poetry is the most highly organized form of intellectual activity."⁶ Through a series of denials, Eliot insists that poetry is not pure idea, for it expresses feelings; but to agree with Wordsworth's claim that poetry is "emotion recollected in tranquility" is to undermine the imprint of the poet's thought in favor of feeling. Further, to claim that poetry is "the most highly organized activity" is to ignore science with its dependence on induction, a form of strict linear thinking. Eliot's dismissal of poetry as philosophy comes easily for him because philosophy clearly deals with the abstract and poetry with the concrete.⁷

6. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (New York: Barnes, 1950) 1.

7. *Ibid.*

There is also at this time emphasis on the intricacy of poetic elements. Eliot perceives poetry as "purely personal." Emotion is "fused" with "suggestions" and "experience." Eventually it sheds the stamp of personality and assumes a new entity as "a work of art."⁸ Gradually the uniqueness of poetry comes into focus for him as evident in the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*:

We can only say that a poem has its own life; that its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data; that the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet.⁹

The satisfaction of this discovery, however, is short-lived. In Eliot's thinking at this time there exists what amounts to a denial of the possibility of definition, reinforced no doubt by his reading of Levy-Bruhl, who writes of "a pre-logical mentality" persisting in civilized man and manifesting itself through the poet. By 1933 Eliot is turning his attention to the qualities of poetry with the conclusion that rhythm is its only single essential quality.

Eliot also addresses the effects of poetry and the role of language in eventuating these effects. The audience he faced held that the function of language is communication, and in the case of poetry language is expected to convey the poet's thoughts and feelings. In order to break this notion, Eliot argues for the imprecision of language in recreating poetic experience. Moreover, he rejects communication as the sole end of poetry: "We can say that in poetry there is communication from writer to reader, but should not proceed from this to think of the poetry as being primarily the vehicle of communication."¹⁰ Having dismissed communication as the end of poetry, Eliot advocates the theory of the "objective correlative." Since a poet cannot tell what his/her poem means, the reader should not first and foremost expect meaning but an aesthetic experience. When a poem is successful, the reader's response approximates the feeling invested in the language. The poet should avoid evoking more feeling than the poem's subject and lan-

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. *Ibid.*, x.

10. T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (New York: Barnes, 1933) 115.

guage warrant. Other effects such as amusement or celebration are possible but accidental. What we see here is Eliot's admission that language, the very fiber of poetry, is elusive and resistant to the poet.

Thus it can be said that Eliot's thinking evolved to a position in which a poem's genesis is incomprehensible and its effects are impractical, unlike those of most prose works. Neither the writer's impulse to communicate nor the impulse to express feeling can explain a poem. It is an object with its own ontological status, a verbal construct with its own life. Archibald Macleish in his poem "Ars Poetica" illustrates this concept of poetry in the familiar lines: "A poem should not mean / But be."

Merton's view of the nature and function of poetry echoes Eliot's in its fundamental aspects. In "Poetry, Symbolism, and Typology," a chapter of *Bread in the Wilderness*, dated 1953 and reprinted in *The Literary Essays*, Merton comments on poetry in a passage I believe is seminal to understanding Merton's thinking on the subject:

He [the poet] seeks above all to put words together in such a way that they exercise a mysterious and vital reactivity among themselves, and so release their secret content of association to produce in the reader an experience that enriches the depths of his spirit in a manner quite unique. A good poem induces an experience that could not be produced by any other combination of words. It is therefore an entity that stands by itself, graced with an individuality that marks it off from every other work of art.¹¹

We are struck by the similarities in Merton's and Eliot's views. Here Merton identifies the essential qualities of poetry. Unlike a prose work, a poem is a unique verbal entity. The creative process remains a mystery; it is, nevertheless, a living act that replicates itself in the poem. The dynamism in the poem, resulting from the play among poetic elements, is internal, further reinforcing its autonomy. Merton's claim that the reader who allows the poem its autonomy and uniqueness will be rewarded with an experience approximating the life of the poem might well reflect a poem in which Eliot's theory of the objective correlative is successfully executed. The phrase "in a manner quite unique" brings to mind Eliot's response to the question once asked

11. Thomas Merton, "Poetry, Symbolism, and Topology," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985) 327.

him: What kind of pleasure does poetry give? His answer: "The kind of pleasure that poetry gives."¹²

Merton's comments on the subject reveal a mind in agreement with modernist theory as articulated by Eliot. In a paper read at a meeting of Latin American poets in Mexico City in 1964, Merton reiterates the uniqueness of the creative process and poetry: "We who are poets know that the reason for a poem is not discovered until the poem itself exists. The reason for a living act is realized only in the act itself."¹³ Poetry is both artifact and a process leading to insight. As such, it pulsates with life. Moreover, it owes no obligation to political, mercantile, or academic life. The expectation of poetry is that it be "rooted in fidelity to life."¹⁴ Free from allegiance to institutions, the poet confronts life directly; his/her goal is to express the truth of reality. Poetry for Merton and Eliot alike requires no practical application. Both critics follow their Victorian predecessors in establishing poetry's utility, but their view on the nature of poetry more closely resembles the Romanic poets, for whom the basis of its utility is extrarational.

Despite the echoes from Eliot's theory of poetry in Merton's thinking, Merton did more than emulate his mentor. Departing from Eliot, he charts an independent course as evidenced in two essays entitled "Poetry and Contemplation," both published in *Commonweal*; the first in 1947, the revision in 1958. As William Shannon indicates, the changes in the revision reflect Merton's evolving attitude toward contemplation. In the later essay the binary division between contemplation and poetry, so troublesome for Merton in the first essay, ceases to be problematic. This change no doubt results from changes in Merton's own life ten years after the publication of the first essay.¹⁵ What I wish to note here is the distinction Merton makes between poetry and contemplation and the role he assigns poetry in the revised essay. According to Merton, contemplation is "the intuitive perception of life at its Source."¹⁶ Moreover, contemplation is of two kinds: (1) "the

12. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 6.

13. Merton, "Message to Poets," in *Literary Essays*, 371.

14. *Ibid.*, 372.

15. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 136.

16. Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," in *Literary Essays*, 340. See also Merton, "The True Legendary Sound: The Poetry and Criticism of Edwin Muir," in *Literary Essays*, 29.

religious intuition of the artist, the lover, or the worshiper" and (2) that which "transcends all 'objects,' all 'things,' and goes beyond all speculation, all creative fervor, all charitable action, and 'rests' in the inexpressible."¹⁷ For Merton there is no conflict between poetry and contemplation in the first sense. Speaking primarily of the Christian poet, he argues that the poet draws from the contemplative experience; as an artist in the Aristotelian sense of maker, the poet possesses the skills to transform vision into images. Although the poet's form of contemplation is less perfect than contemplation in the second sense because the goal of the poet returns him/her to the natural order, the poet touches God in the creative process. To a supernatural experience he/she applies natural talent. One can argue that without the monastic life Merton may not have arrived at this position. Such a claim is defensible. It is also likely, however, that without his participation in the contemporary debate over the redefinition of poetry, Merton may not have understood the complexity of poetry. The relationship between poetry and contemplation he perceives is grounded in the study and writing of poetry.

While it is apparent that both Eliot and Merton assign poetry a privileged status, neither is a pure formalist satisfied with textual analysis for critical judgment. Literary standards based on such analysis may determine the quiddity of a poem, but textual analysis alone falls short of identifying a great poem. Both men recognize that poetry does not exist in a vacuum. Moreover, both men fear the menace of secularism in the modern age, a secularism so widespread that it threatens to banish belief in the supernatural to exile. With religious faith replaced by devotion to Mammon, Eliot and Merton seek in poetry a role beyond the aesthetic in order to combat the threat posed by modern secularism to the human spirit. The solution rests in placing poetry in a context larger than the purely aesthetic. With this purpose in mind Eliot turns to tradition; Merton, to human experience itself. Since poetry encompasses the totality of human experience, Merton believes it capable of commenting on various perspectives of that experience, be they psychological, metaphysical, or theological. Merton clings to this position. As late as 1966, in a letter to James Laughlin, he notes his agreement with Jacques Maritain "that perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems in our day is in

17. *Ibid.*, 341.

the form of 'creative writing and literary criticism.'¹⁸ It is significant to observe that the context Merton creates for poetry is more inclusive than Eliot's.

Eliot's pursuit of a context for poetry was long and arduous. I shall limit my comments here to his view of tradition. Tradition for Eliot encompasses the historical past and an awareness of the past living in the present. A poet writes "not merely with his own generation in his bones" but with the feeling that literary predecessors and contemporaries write through him/her. This view combines the temporal and the timeless. The poet adds a new vision to his/her predecessors', a vision relevant for contemporary society. The poet is also linked to contemporaries writing in the same genre. Within this context, the poem emerges not as a clone but as a mutation that combines the new and the old. Thus Eliot expands the criteria for judging poetry beyond textual analysis. The poem must stand the scrutiny of comparison to similar entities past and present, and the critic is positioned to judge poets not only on their specific works but also on their success in embodying the tradition of the genre.

But Eliot's advocacy of poetry as a voice speaking to the present via the past only partially solves the challenge of establishing a place for poetry in a secular society. The problem becomes crucial when Eliot converts to Anglo-Catholicism. In the early 1920s before his conversion he is already acknowledging a relationship between poetry and religion. Although at the time this relationship remains unclear and although he fears the danger of wandering from the narrower practice of literary criticism by viewing poetry in a religious context, the recognition of the relationship provides a starting point for Eliot's investigation. His later admission that "a man's theory of the place of poetry is not independent of his view of life in general"¹⁹ is further evidence that his personal faith infuses his literary principles. When eventually his notion of tradition focuses on the Christian, there follows the need for a theory that addresses the moral conflict in poetry as well as a moral tradition from a Christian perspective.

In his essay "Religion and Literature" dated 1935, Eliot writes the following: "Literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint."²⁰ According to Eliot, if

18. Hart, from introduction to *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, xv.

19. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 119.

20. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1950) 343.

an age holds a common ethical and theological position the critic's task is to draw it out from a work; insofar as an age holds no common position the critic is still bound to judge a work by a particular perspective. Because Eliot believes literature influences human behavior, the critic's task becomes a moral imperative. In this same essay he distinguishes between readers' preferences and the ideal, what they ought to prefer. It is the critic's responsibility to assist in holding up the ideal for his/her readers. The Christian critic has the added responsibility to apply criteria of judgment that may be ignored by others. We are familiar with Eliot's description of himself as a critic: "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion."²¹ Eliot later objects to those who remove the statement from its context. (He spoke these lines in 1927 over dinner with Irving Babbitt, his teacher at Harvard and lifetime friend, to inform him of his conversion.) But it is evident that Eliot's stance on literature and religion—if not literature and politics—informs his criticism. Dante remains a favorite of Eliot's not only because the structure, lines, and imagery of *The Divine Comedy* reach new heights in his hand but because Dante's work is situated in Christianity, the dominant tradition of his time. Modern writers failing to reflect Eliot's position are dismissed as limited. For Eliot, D. H. Lawrence displays heresy in "The Shadow in the Rose Garden," and James Joyce, who demonstrates an awareness of Christian principles, approaches moral significance in a work like "The Dead." And how can one who advocated such principles write "The Hollow Men" and *The Waste Land*? The answer is simply that Eliot's goal in these works is to illustrate the consequences of secularism on modern society. A writer like Graham Greene once defined himself as a writer who happened to be a Catholic, but Eliot considered himself a Catholic writer-critic for whom the works of the imagination, literary criticism, and personal religious faith were inextricably related.

Merton, like Eliot, recognizes the necessity of situating literature in a tradition lest its merit be limited to the aesthetic. Furthermore, a tradition is necessary in order to ensure its relevance for the present. In his essay on Edwin Muir, a poet Merton admired, he agrees with Muir's claim that ignorance of the past is a tragic loss for contemporary society. Without a connection between present and past, we forfeit understanding ourselves and risk alienation because our heri-

21. T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (New York: Farrar, 1965) 15.

tage is left to atrophy.²² Like Eliot's view of tradition, Merton's assumes a Christian character as a result of his personal faith. In their efforts to clarify Christian tradition, Eliot distinguishes between devotional poetry and religious poetry. Merton distances himself from the orthodox "Catholic poet," that is, one who writes devotional verse.²³ He believes in the need to liberate religion from specific forms of piety and narrowly focused commitments. In his essay on William Faulkner, "Baptism in the Forest," dated 1967, we have a glimpse of where Merton's thinking is leading him: "The idea of religion today is mixed up with confessionalism, with belonging to this or that religious institution, with making and advertising a particular kind of religious commitment,"²⁴ Clearly Merton's view of religion extends beyond the common practices of particular institutions and denominations; it is best understood as catholic in the universal sense of the word.

For Merton, questions of human origin, the human condition, and human destiny replace piety and various forms of devotion as religious concerns worthy of investigation. Hence his claim that the works of Sophocles, Faulkner, and Camus are religious, for they deal with the fundamental questions of life despite the differences in the writers' perspectives. Merton, while agreeing with Eliot about the synergistic relationship between literature and religion, crosses the threshold of orthodoxy in order to define this relationship independently. The religious poet or creative writer must tap into the "ontological sources of life" that are accessed through the imagination.²⁵ For Merton, the imagination is "power by which we apprehend living beings and living creatures in their individuality as they live and move not in their ideas and categories. The power of the poet's imaginative vision . . . is that it directs our eyes to beings in such a way as to 'feel the full weight and uniqueness of their lives.'"²⁶ Abstractions alone are inadequate; the poet must convey the concreteness of human experience.

Eliot considers major religious literature to possess "general awareness." Merton's counterpart is *sapientia*. The latter he defines

22. Merton, "The True Legendary Sound," in *Literary Essays*, 34–35.

23. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, ed. Robert E. Daggy, 362.

24. Merton, "'Baptism in the Forest': Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner," in *Literary Essays*, 97.

25. Merton, "The True Legendary Sound," in *Literary Essays*, 30.

26. *Ibid.*, 34.

as "the highest level of cognition," lying beyond "*scientia*, which is systematic knowledge [and] beyond *intellectus*, which is intuitive understanding."²⁷ *Sapientia*, or wisdom, grasps ultimate truths and ultimate values.²⁸ Merton, who laments the lack of *sapientia* in modern society, argues that because it relies for its expression on myth and symbols, the common language of both literature and religion, the imaginative writer and the critic through interpretation are empowered to convey it.

For Eliot the methodology of modern criticism rests on analysis and comparison, the critic's literary and philosophical background, and his/her objective reading of the text. The organization of elements—linguistic and structural, their arrangement to create an effect on the reader—determines the aesthetic merit of a text. Furthermore, how the work compares to similar types also contributes to its merit. Critics who failed to embody these requisites in their totality, such as Coleridge, Swinburne, and Symons, Eliot considers flawed. It is to Samuel Johnson that Eliot awards the laurel for critical excellence, specifically for his *Life of Cowley*. Eliot approves of Johnson's criticism because he has distinguished between contemporary and traditional ideals. Moreover, Johnson judges Cowley's work not only in its immediate context but also within the context of the past. When criticism follows this model, it approximates, according to Eliot, "a voyage of discovery."

As earlier noted, Merton's review of John Crowe Ransom's work *The World's Body* confirms his understanding of the method and lexicon of modernist criticism. At the time Ransom's work appeared in 1938, his critical stance was considered in opposition to the pervasive biographical and historical criticism of the time. For the young Merton, Ransom's work provided an important step toward an understanding of literature as a special form of cognition. From Mark Van Doren he learned that left alone without the imposition of an ideology, a text will reveal its own truth. Merton tests this approach in his master's essay on Blake. His explanation of Blake's use of contraries in the latter part of the essay illustrates his reliance on textual analysis. Throughout his instruction on literature, he draws attention to syntactic structure, images, symbols, archetypes, rhythmic patterns of language, plot, and voice. For Merton all the elements are vital insofar as they assist the reader in experiencing a literary work. Those who employ

27. Merton, "'Baptism in the Forest,'" in *Literary Essays*, 98.

28. *Ibid.*, 99.

the New Critical methods to excess, however, lose favor with Merton. He has little tolerance for Joycean scholars who cavil over one part or another of *Ulysses* in their zeal to validate a particular theory. Merton recognizes that criticism can be damaging when it smothers a text in order to display a critic's brilliance.

If Merton's views appear derivative of Eliot's regarding the nature and function of literature, his critical writing attests to an independent voice. Clearly his interpretation of tradition, especially as it impacts on religion, extends beyond the boundaries Eliot establishes. His inclusiveness represents a departure from those modernists whose focus was limited to textual analysis. In seeking to identify the function of poetry, Merton belongs to a long lineage including Plato, Sidney, Dryden, Johnson, Shelley, Arnold, and Eliot. Arnold is credited with introducing religion into the discussion of literature in the nineteenth century. Eliot clarifies the discussion for modern society. The New Critics hold that a literary work is apolitical and ahistorical. Moreover, literature overtly religious in content is of second rank. But Merton, following Eliot's lead, voices a dissenting view. Great literature is rooted in religion because the latter constitutes an integral part of the past and because both draw upon a common use of language. Merton advances the argument beyond Eliot's. For him the value of literature is also determined by its success in framing the imponderable questions of life. That Eliot served Merton as a trusted companion throughout this process of exploration and discovery is evident.

There were many streams of influence that converged in Merton's mind. Among them, Eliot's critical theory is significant because it helps us understand the principles that inform Merton's literary judgment. Acknowledging Eliot's preeminence as both poet and critic, Merton pays him the highest compliment. Eliot's work, he remarks, embodies "wisdom for the modern world." Unwittingly perhaps, with this statement Merton voiced a debt of gratitude to one whose ideas served him well as a springboard to further exploration of the role of literature in contemporary society.