

REVIEW OF CRITICISM OF THOMAS MERTON'S POETRY

—by **Bonnie Bowman Thurston**

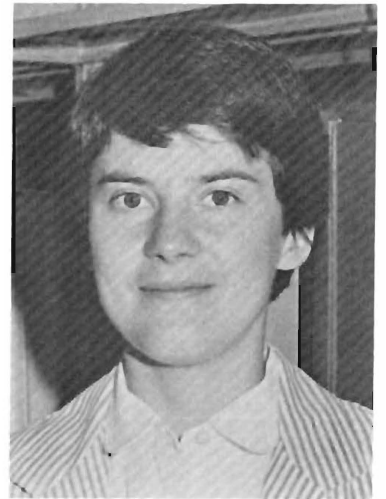
Introduction

Despite the publication of *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (1977) which received major reviews, and more recently *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (1981), another prodigious work, Merton's place in the main stream of American literature has never been assured. This is due, in part, to a general suspicion about religious poetry, and in part to the criticism that Merton's work first attracted.

This is not to say there is not a substantial body of critical material on Merton's poems. This summary indicates that there is ample critical work for the student of Merton, although it is of uneven quality. The survey will confine itself to Merton's poetry (excluding translations), to articles and books in English, and to works which deal directly with the poetry (not to reviews of books about Merton which soon are several removes from the realm of Ideas!).

In order to survey the material as succinctly as possible, I have arbitrarily grouped the critical material into four categories: reviews of Merton's books (including posthumous general reviews), essays on the poems, dissertations and theses, and books. I conclude with a note on problems in Merton criticism and succumb to admittedly subjective remarks and evaluations. My intent is not to pass final literary judgement, but to provide an over-view of the criticism devoted to Merton's poetry either as a starting point for new work, or as a short-cut for scholars in other areas of Merton studies who are interested in his literary reputation.

Anyone doing serious bibliographical or critical work on Merton should be aware of several helps. The first bibliographical volume on Merton was collated by Frank Dell'Isola (*Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956) and covers works to 1956. The second, compiled and edited by Marquita Breit (*Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*. Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974), includes more than 1800 items. These are general entries, but provide a logical starting point for literary research. *The Merton Seasonal* updates the list of publications quarterly, and the Summer, 1981 volume contains a bibliography on the poetry by Dr. Robert E. Daggy which



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is not exhaustive, but provides a handy reference to the major books, essays, and theses. Dr. Daggy can also provide information on Thomas J. Nelson's *A Thomas Merton Bibliography* which is a 500 page typescript.

Reviewing the criticism is easier because, both chronologically and stylistically, Merton's poetry falls into two "periods." From 1944 to 1949 Merton published four volumes of poetry which are largely traditional in style and content. With exceptions, these poems are devotional and focus on traditionally Catholic subjects. Other than *The Strange Islands* (1957) Merton published no new verse between 1949 and 1962. (The *Selected Poems* of 1959 are exactly what the title suggests.) During this time Merton had numerous responsibilities in the monastic community and was writing prose. He produced four more volumes of verse between 1962 and his death in 1968, and *The Collected Poems* (1977) includes poems previously uncollected or edited. These later poems (1962-1968) are more experimental in style and exhibit more variety in theme and subject matter.

Reviews of Books

The early poems received two kinds of critical attention: from the literary "industry" and from other religious. The literary critics gave mixed reviews. Robert Lowell's remark is typical: "The poet would appear to be more phenomenal than the poetry."¹ Critics take Merton to task for structural problems, merely decorative imagery, and heavy rhetoric,² and more or less conclude the volumes contain a "disproportionate burden of dross."³ The second group of critics give Merton almost universally glowing reviews because, "He reminds us unforgettably of the victorious beauty of truth."⁴

An accurate assessment lies somewhere in the middle. Merton's early verse is just that. Objectively, he was fortunate to receive serious critical attention; many young poets are not so fortunate.

Although *The Strange Islands* (which I like very much) was almost universally panned, the later volumes continued to receive attention from the literary world. In addition to reviews as the books appeared, a body of explication begins to emerge (see next section). Several reviewers note the increasingly important paradox of silence and poetry. Hayden Carruth on *Emblems of a Season of Fury* is typical: "... the book comes from the contrariety of his need for silence and his need to speak out."⁵ Critics note the departure from earlier style and point out surrealism, anti-form, and "automatic writing," in some cases as "a regrettable departure from his many uplifting beatific works."⁶ The literary reviews of *The Collected Poems*, like that in the *New York Times Book Review* 5 February 1978, are surprisingly unsympathetic.

Despite the fact that many were published immediately after Merton's untimely death when shock might have clouded judgement, the posthumous appraisals of Merton as a poet are of great value. Three summary essays are essential reading: Ralph Sturm's "Thomas Merton: Poet," John Leax's "Poetry and Contemplation: The Inner War of Thomas Merton," and Michael Higgins' "Thomas Merton: The Poet and the Word."⁷ To try to summarize these fine essays would be a disservice.

Essays on the Poems

Because they either attempt to evaluate Merton in the context of the mainstream of English poetry, or explicate specific poems (and, therefore, have the virtue of focus), this category of criticism is of primary interest to serious students of literature. I find it the strongest body of work on the poetry.

From the beginning of his poetic career, the critics note influences which shape Merton's style. Many early commentators point, quite rightly, to the metaphysical poets, to Blake, and to Hopkins. Others note Merton's later work shows the influence of studies of Eastern religions and exhibits cross fertilization from Latin American poets.

It is too early to grant Merton any permanent "place" in literature. Nevertheless, several articles have put his works into literary categories like the San Francisco "beat" poets; the generation of Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot, and W.H. Auden; with the American epic tradition; and, again, with the metaphysicals. This amazing variety of categories suggests the range of stylistic and thematic experimentation Merton allowed himself.

Interestingly, it is the last two long poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*, that have attracted the greatest number of explicators. *Cables* is exceedingly complex, and, in spite of excellent articles by Flaherty and Glimm,⁸ deserves more sustained work. Merton provided a more evident structure in *Lograire*, though it is my understanding he had not completed it at his death. Articles by James Glimm and Virginia Randall,⁹ and a chapter in Padovano's *The Human Journey* are starting places for continued expository work.

The field continues to be wide open for expository essays on Merton's poems. This should encourage those caught in the literary glut!

Dissertations and Theses

There are, so far as I know, eleven completed Master's theses and five completed doctoral dissertations devoted exclusively to Merton's poetry. Generally speaking, the Master's theses are very general works explicating "selected" poems or treating general themes. They are interesting from a historical perspective as they began to appear early (1950) and span Merton's career. (Incidentally, Merton's own Columbia M.A. thesis on Blake is a significant source of information on his understanding and practice of poetry.)

The doctoral dissertations form perhaps the most significant body of literary criticism, and each is to be commended. Susan Campbell's early dissertation (1954) is the best available summary of Merton's early career as a poet. The dissertations of the 70's attempt either to classify and evaluate the poetic corpus (Higgins, Schmidt, Thurston) or to provide an "integrating principle" (Kilcourse). Each is well worth the time and trouble it takes to get it through interlibrary loan or on microfilm.

Book-length Studies

Surprisingly, there are only two book-length studies devoted exclusively to poetry, and neither, in this writer's opinion, does it justice. The first study published, George Woodcock's *Thomas Merton Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (1978) groups the poems by periods in Merton's life, draws in relevant autobiographical writing, and provides some explications. The general, evaluatory statements are sound. Lentfoehr's book, *Words and Silence: On the Poetry of Thomas Merton* (1979), is in some ways a memoir more than a critical study, and this may well be its strength; it provides us with material from Merton's notebooks and correspondence that is not otherwise available. Commentary on specific poems is helpful, but not sustained.

Three general studies deserve mention. Ross Labrie's *The Art of Thomas Merton* (1979) is an excellent introduction to Merton the writer and pp. 109-169, the "Poet," is a good summary and provides especially helpful commentary on *Lograrie*. Elena Maltis' *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey* (1980) summarizes the writings in chapter one (and is, to my mind, the best general book on Merton in print). Anthony Padovano's *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton Symbol of a Century* (1983) was mentioned earlier. Padovano discusses poems and subjects related to the poetry in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

We do not yet have a strong critical work devoted solely to evaluating and explicating Merton's poetry. Perhaps it is too soon to hope for balanced evaluation, but the scholar who provides it will be doing Merton followers, and the literary world, a great service.

Problems and Conclusions

Lowell's remark in 1945 about the man and the poetry seems as accurate now as it was then. A very human problem is involved: those who are sympathetic to the man are sympathetic to the verse. As the careers of poets like Donne, Herbert, Hopkins, and Eliot demonstrate, the life and the work cannot be (or have not been) fully separated. However, personality cult should not be the determining factor in literary assessment.

Second, and related, is the issue of genre. A literary work is not necessarily a devotional or a theological one (or vice versa). Different genres of writing are normally judged by different standards, or we end up comparing bananas and shoe laces. Merton's acknowledged success as a devotional writer does not mean either that he is a good or a bad poet. If serious, literary judgement is to be rendered, the poems must be allowed to stand (or fall) on their own.

Finally, at this time any conclusions about Merton's standing in the literary world must be tentative. In this writer's opinion, Merton's poetry is not taken seriously by the academic, literary establishment, and what critical attention it has received produced, at best, mixed reviews. In the general literary community, Merton is neither widely known or highly praised. With each passing year, we can hope for fuller and more balanced judgements. But as with so many things, we must wait for time to pass the final judgement.

NOTES

¹Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton." *Commonweal*. June 22, 1945, 240.

²Frederick Morgan, *Hudson Review*, Vol 1, No. 2, Summer, 1948, 259.

³John F. Nims, "Two Catholic Poets." *Poetry*, Feb., 1945, 265.

⁴Sister Julie, "New Directions Presents a Catholic Poet." *America*, July 21, 1945, 316.

⁵Hayden Carruth, "Among Friends." *Hudson Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring, 1964, 153.

⁶Lawrence Liebermann, "A Confluence of Poets." *Poetry*, Vol. 114, No. 1, April, 1969, 48.

⁷Leax. *Christianity Today*, May 23, 1975, 835-36, 838.

Strum. *American Benedictine Review*, March, 1971, 1-20.

Higgins. *Cistercian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1977, 292-307.

⁸Luke Flaherty, "Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*: A Critical Study." *Renascence*, Fall, 1971, 3-32.

Glimm, James York, "Exile Ends in Satire: Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*." *Cithara*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Nov., 1971, 31-40.

⁹Glimm, "Thomas Merton's Last Poem: *The Geography of Lograire*." *Renascence*, Winter, 1974, 95-104.

Randall, "Contrapuntal Irony and Theme in Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire*." *Renascence*, Vol. 28, No. 4, Summer, 1976, 191-202. and "The Mandala as Structure in Thomas Merton's *The Geography of Lograire*." *Notre Dame English Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Oct., 1978,

1-13.

