

SOPHIANIC CRITICISM

Review of

THE LITERARY ESSAYS OF THOMAS MERTON

Edited by Brother Patrick Hart

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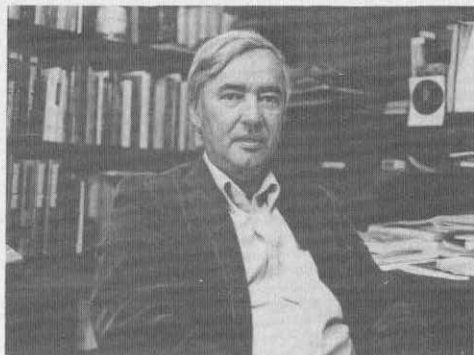
—Reviewed by **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

Brother Patrick Hart's edition of Merton's literary essays was a welcome addition to Mertoniana when it was first published in 1981. It made a wonderful - and equally hefty - companion to the *Collected Poems*. This paperback edition is doubly welcome because it brings into a more economical range a volume which all students of Merton will want to use both for private and classroom purposes.

The criticism of literary criticism is not an easy task. Just to be a literary critic demands that one know (a) literature itself and (b) a method to convey a sense of the value of that literature to others. Merton knew literature. His life was bound up with reading and writing; his education was shaped by profound students of literature like Mark Van Doren; his mature life was revealed by the writing that he did as part of his monastic vocation. His principles of criticism are clear. He was a moralist in the sense that Matthew Arnold and Lionel Trilling were moralists but his deep critical center is, to borrow a phrase that he used for others, sophianic: "For wisdom cannot be learned from a book. It is acquired only in a living formation; and it is tested by the master himself in certain critical situations." (p. 99) His criticism, then, came from knowledge and experience. How does one adequately assess such an accomplishment?

At a certain level one can look from the superior vantage of time and ask: what endures? what illumines? To respond to those questions allows us to engage the critic as one who passes on his or her wisdom to others who also seek to understand and to experience.

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LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM

The easier question is that of endurance. For this review I reread all of the essays in the book just as Brother Patrick arranged them, i.e., topically rather than chronologically. It is easy, reading in that fashion, to spot the ephemera: the single paragraph introductions to various Latin American poets, the encomium for Flannery O'Connor or the defense of J. F. Powers as acts of Catholic *pietas*; the one page reviews knocked out in his student days at Columbia to get free books and a few dollars; some written answers to written questions that sound a bit like thoughts while shaving, etc. It is also easy to spot those which had a certain currency for a period - the 1960s, for example - which today seem a bit quaint and dated. But, in those essays one also sees some other things. In an April, 1968 review essay occasioned by the publication of a book by Thomas Altizer (then a very hot ticket because of the "Death of God" rage) Merton writes rather respectfully of Altizer's appropriation of Blake for his own version of apocalyptic theology. But - and I think this is the point - his enthusiasm is qualified when Altizer brings in the figure of Hegel. However kindly Merton treats Altizer's marriage of Hegel and Blake there is no doubt that he sees mysticism being turned into mystification. Merton, in short, has that best tool of the good critic: a fine nose for what, in this decorous journal, I shall call taurine effluvium.

Merton is at his best when he is fully engaged with a writer with whom he feels a certain existential sympathy (naturally enough) and on whom he focuses with attention. It should not be surprising, then, that the finest pages in this volume are the long essays on Pasternak, Camus, and the transcribed conferences he gives on Faulkner. In none of these lengthy works is there any close analysis of the text or of its structure. Merton is the least formalist of critics. His concern is with ideas, values, and intuitions. What he wrote of the "sapiential" tradition of criticism to which I alluded earlier is really the key to understanding Merton's approach to literature. He is concerned with Camus' integrity, his lean sense of morality, his thirst for meaning, and his commitment. In Pasternak he senses an awareness of the world as a sacramentally vibrant cosmos in which meaning breaks through the mundane. In Faulkner he senses - preeminently in the character of Dilsey - the radical eruption of sanctity in the world where the eruptions are more commonly revelations of the horrid and the violent.

This approach to literature was one in which he had been trained by men like Mark Van Doren. But it was also a method congenial to one whose very core was that of the monk who sought out, undoubtedly lived, and stood as a warrant for, that deep center which, as the poet Theodore Roethke wrote, stands at the very heart of things. That conviction, burned in him both by conviction and by experience, is what saves Merton from being the mere dabbler. It is easy to say that he read too promiscuously, that he dabbled in too many things, that he was given to too many enthusiasms, that he was, in short, given over to busyness. Whatever truth there may be in those charges must be counter-balanced by the fact - one can observe in every one of these essays - that however far his mind roamed there were certain basic premises which always were in the fore of his thinking and seeing.

We must say in all truth that Merton was not a great literary critic but could have been one had he not decided to be a very great monk who also wrote literary criticism. What he did do very well was to demonstrate in his criticism that it was possible to approach the literary artifacts of an age, describe them with fairness, and then subject them to a critique that was both literary and contemplative. That accomplishment should not be underestimated. There is no other American Catholic of this century who commanded a wider cultural audience than Thomas Merton. He reflected a certain level of maturity in American Catholicism which was unmatched in his lifetime and, one must confess, in our own. It is hard to think of any culture critic, writing with specifically religious and contemplative values, who commands the respect that Merton did in his time.

Merton's role as a cultural critic, then, cannot be measured on the basis of his long range impact on criticism. By that criterion his role is slight.¹ What he is important for, however, is as a paradigm for the ways things ought to be done. It has always been my strong conviction that Merton as a paradigmatic person is far and away more important than Merton the writer. That comes across powerfully in these essays. One thinks of him writing in the monastery of Kentucky while the craziness of the 1960s went on apace. That craziness is present in these essays: the alienated Blacks are here; so is the blood of Vietnam; the turbulent times in the country, in Europe, and in the church are all here. He was close to those issues as we all know. Yet, he was also distant since he wrote, not from the frontlines, but from the scriptorium and the hermitage. The worst advice he ever got was from someone who has plenty of bad advice to offer: Rosemary Ruether. Merton's power came from being a monk and being in a place. His power came from not being in the ghettos, from not being an activist.

The argument of Ruether (and others) was that the monastic vocation was irrelevant and should be abandoned. What Merton saw - however dimly at times - is that essence of the monastic vocation is irrelevancy and that its irrelevancy is its strength. At the edges and margins he was able to encounter the sapiential figures of his day, engage them, and distill their wisdom for others. It might be impossible to show adequately how Faulkner's Dilsey nourished his well known passion for social justice or trace out how Pasternak's courage strengthened Merton's own commitment to peace and justice but there is no doubt that those connections were there. It would be equally arduous to explicate how the study of literature made more profound his understanding of the Gospel and/or the contemplative tradition but one senses that those connections also exist.

Rereading these essays has convinced me again of something that I have long believed: Merton came closer than anyone I know of in our time to creating a lived version of religious humanism that held in tension all the major paradoxes and oxymorons of Christianity in particular and mysticism in general. That absorption of literary, artistic, historical, spiritual, and theological culture produced a kind of open generosity in him that was catholic in the widest sense of the term. In that sense Merton is one of the luminous religious figures of our time. It does not diminish his reputation to say that he was not a great literary critic. What is important is that he thought criticism worth doing by a monk and in doing it, did it well, and from a deep center of conviction.

Those interested in literary criticism alone will not profit much from this book; too much is dated and the omissions are too glaring (did Merton, to cite one example, ever comment on Wallace Stevens? Or, for that matter, Roethke? Auden? Spender?). Those interested in Merton as a religious thinker and as a contemplative witness will profit much as they get a close look at how this great monk looked at some of the representative writers of our day.

¹ Merton's name does not even appear in the index of such standard surveys of religion and literary criticism as Vernon Ruland's *Horizons of Criticism* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1975) or Lynn Ross-Bryant's *Imagination and the Life of the Spirit* (Chico: Scholar's Press, 1981).