

## A Divided Man in a Divided Scene

Review of

*The Merton Annual: Volume 12 (1999)*

Edited by Victor A. Kramer

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Reviewed by **Gary Young, CR**

“I am not really interested in being a consistent character at all. It is much more amusing (that is, in touch with the Muses) to be paradoxical, or to be coincidence of opposites. It seems to me, then, that I am sort of a Joker” (Alan Watts).

Victor Kramer, who edits this volume of the *Annual*, warns us in his introduction (7-12) that this collection of Mertoniana will not taste of warmed-over adulation. Indeed, this collection of Merton studies invigorates us because the perspectives presented engage the readers with the necessity of seeing beyond Merton. Kramer prepares us, just in case any of us were anticipating another serving of Merton worship. We are not surprised, therefore, when we are confronted by writers like Michael Casey and James Wiseman. Or should I say when Merton is confronted by them? This latest *Annual* is not an unexpected attack nor a butchery, however. It is a tribute to the complexity of the person who transforms so many lives and who, ironically, has so many contradictions as to provide an analogy for us who can't seem to be or to find heroes.

Following Victor Kramer's remarks, Merton speaks to us in the first selection (13-21), which his secretary (Patrick Hart) resurrected. The treatise (“Monastic Courtesy”) vibrates with irony and levity. Merton wants his newly-arrived brethren to enhance and to strengthen community life by the details of good manners – Merton a.k.a. Mr. Manners. A brief passage leads us through the rest of the *Annual*, although we may not be aware of its role unless it is taken out of context: “One's attitude and bearing have a ‘social meaning’ – our very facial expression can be a discourtesy or an insult to others. By our expression and carriage we show our idea of our relationship to the community” (19). Another is Merton on a one-legged ladder: “Observe hospital rules. Do what the Sister says” (21). The importance of Hart's choice of material is that of an ironic postscript to Merton's life.

John Eudes Bamberger, a fellow Trappist and Merton's friend, then and now, has presented his subject with an ideal combination of objectivity and subjectivity (22-37). Some of Bamberger's lines, inspired by Merton, are memorable. “He often made the point to his students that ideals and strict application of principles of ascetic and moral behavior bring about unintended effects, and would insist that persons transcend in value all systems” (28). Bamberger does not traduce his friend

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by glossing over the same contradictions which Casey, another Trappist, waves in our faces. Much of this *Annual* is given to monastic perspectives and it serves Merton and us to witness the Trappist dialectic concerning monastic integrity. We can say yes to Bamberger and the same to Casey – on the other side so to speak.

Between Bamberger and Casey, Jonathan Montaldo has placed another Trappist, one who must be a camouflaged legend: Laurence Bourget. The format of this section (38-61) is that of interview, a genre which usually cools and refreshes. Bourget does most of the talking but Montaldo knows how to uncork him. Bourget was there at the beginning, was in the thick of the Merton Phenomenon in the Order, and still presides like a wise one in his assessment of Merton's place in Cistercian psychology and spirituality. I hope that I am joined by others who would like to read *Rara Avis: The Autobiography of Dom Laurence Bourget*, a title I would propose for a Bourget study.

Michael Casey (62-84) isn't mean. He's frank and honest. Honest. He questions Merton's validity as one who represents the Cistercian ideal. He vindicates Dr. Zilboorg, Merton's old antagonist. Casey doesn't say that Merton is a dilettante but I may have overlooked that term. He does claim that Merton is "boringly predictable" (63) and calls his life a "cautionary tale" (84). Casey says things that we need to hear, for isn't every life a cautionary tale? Chaucer thought so.

Enter the Benedictine James A. Wiseman (85-102). After Casey's cauterization, Wiseman holds Merton down to teach him and us about the price of romantic love. M. and M. should have analyzed their sexuality and saved themselves and others the silliness of their affair. Wiseman gives us some interesting facts about the dynamics of romantic love according to science. (I wonder what Chaucer would say to that.) Wiseman regrets that Merton did not seek the counsel he needed from a wise monk while he was head over heels. Everything that Wiseman presents is very logical. Truthful. But who plans on romantic love? Does Eros negotiate? What's the answer?

Volume 12 is delightfully full of controversy and radical ideas. And wouldn't you know that Joan Chittister, another Benedictine, would add her voice (103-16)? Like Casey, Chittister repeats the fact that Merton is atypical, and she is glad of it. She sees Merton's monasticism as a ground for his radical ideas (seeds) which fell into the mind and heart of a fifteen-year-old girl and inspired her. Surely that girl/this woman is a parallel phenomenon. Sister Joan, as many of us know and appreciate, hasn't time for stereotypes. She serves a renewed purpose. She realizes "that though nothing we do changes the past, everything we do changes the future" (116). The momentum of her diction is echoed in her prophetic delivery. She has a Merton mantle (cowl).

Francis Kline, a Trappist abbot, reinforces Chittister with his truly interested questions about Merton's engagement with the world (117-28). Kline adds more understanding to the enigma of the monk-prophet. His treatise seems to be a complementary addition to the opinions of Bamberger and Casey. He offers comparisons like Anthony of Egypt, Francis of Assisi, and Cardinal Newman with an insight we should not miss. One item which strikes me particularly is the information that *The Life of St. Anthony* had a profound cultural effect in its time according to the great Harnack (121). Why does the biography of a monk transform society?

In the heart of this *Annual*, Patrick O'Connell lowers the pressure with a meditative escape with Merton/Moses (129-63). *A Man in the Divided Sea* surely must be one of those Merton volumes that has fallen behind the bookshelf as poetry does too frequently. O'Connell has dusted it off and reminded us of the youthful Merton whose exuberant lines, not necessarily great poetry, greet his horizons. With the greatest of analysis and details, O'Connell parts the waves of lines and letters

with such affection and dexterity as to make us wonder if Professor O'Connell is overshadowing the Poet O'Connell. Wouldn't a hyphenated man appreciate a divided monk?

Bradford T. Stull introduces a section of Volume 12 which considers the mutual influence of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. His brief essay (164-67) and the two that follow reinforce what Bamberger had to say about Merton's "broad contact with a variety of persons" (24). Despite its brevity, Stull's "wild seeds" of contemplation aptly quotes lines of Wendell Berry, whose *Selected Poems* are reviewed later in the *Annual* (250-52). (Another great prophet out of Kentucky!) Stull's appreciation of Merton's wild quality made me think of David Belcastro's great paper at the 1999 ITMS General Meeting, entitled "Merton the Trickster." Sister Marilyn Sunderman, RSM (168-88) and Harry Murray (189-206) presented papers at a symposium in 1998 at Rivier College exploring the legacies of Day and Merton and they have been incorporated into this issue of the *Annual*. Going through these essays, we are reminded that we have behind us those heady days, when the Berrigans, Day, and Merton were upsetting the status quo. Certainly now is the time to put those persons and that era in perspective. What was happening to the collective soul and psyche in mid-century? Our youth (alas!) may only have a superficial knowledge of the women and men who transformed this century. Is it possible that the anima/animus which found radical voices once is now too little appreciated? Sunderman and Murray inform and/or remind us of the uncommon Christians who unsettled hierarchies and revived a Church overcome by incense. Considering the relationship of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, we can see that they shared an uncommon plane of being by being uncommonly interested in the common plane. Uncommonly insightful! Uncommonly outspoken! Readers will be grateful to Rivier College for being the catalyst for such voices as Stull, Sunderman, and Murray.

George Kilcourse, Jr. shares editorship of *The Merton Annual* with Victor Kramer. Reading Kilcourse's bibliographic review-essay (the concluding essay) will prove the value of his role as an editor, that is, one who provides the best of literature (207-32). Furthermore, Kilcourse enables serious Merton students to assess the various values of the books he lists and annotates. Really serious students will want to reflect upon Philip Sheldrake's call for "alternative frameworks" (207). As Kilcourse infers, with his crisp, brilliant diction, Merton should not be isolated as a kind of reserved sacrament but incorporated into an interdisciplinary spirituality. This issue of the *Annual* illustrates the kind of proper complexity that makes Merton a proper subject for alternative frameworks. Kilcourse and Kramer deserve our gratitude for their professional competency put to use in Merton studies.

This *Annual* concludes with some recent publications about/by Merton and his milieu. The *Annual* has been printed and presented in such a way as to honor Merton's dictum contained in his "Monastic Courtesy": "Neatness is a sign of courtesy. Be considerate in choice of topics. Interesting news, without preaching or blowing your own horn" (21).