

UNIFYING MERTON

Review of

THOMAS MERTON
by Victor A. Kramer

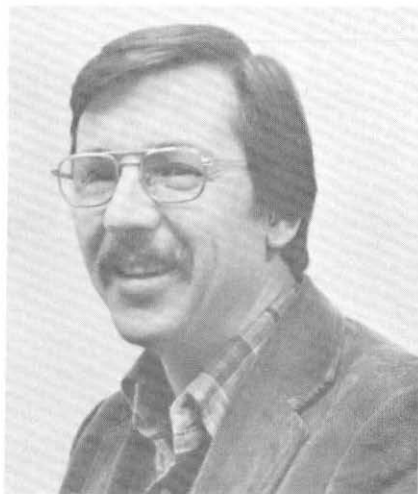
—Reviewed by **John Leax**

Victor Kramer's essays are familiar to Merton scholars. Over the last ten years he has produced valuable discussions of Merton's journals, Merton's poetry, and Merton's autobiographical writings. Preparing this volume for Twayne's United States Authors Series, however, must have presented Kramer challenges greater than those he faced in writing any of his articles. First, dealing systematically with all of Merton's major works required of Kramer not only wide reading to treat Merton's range of subjects and concerns but multiple critical skills to discuss the many genres he utilized. Second, if that were not enough, Kramer had to produce a work accessible to undergraduate scholars. That he has succeeded and given us a valuable book is a tribute to his knowledge as a scholar and skill as a writer.

Following the typical arrangement of other books in this series, Kramer has organized his material in roughly chronological order. He begins with the obligatory chapter of biographical background and follows it with an excellent discussion of Merton's autobiographical impulse revealed in *My Argument with the Gestapo*, *The Secular Journal*, and *The Seven Storey Mountain*. After these two chapters, however, he departs from slavish adherence to chronology and divides his book to cover the remainder of Merton's work according to genre and overlapping periods. Seeing the poetry as the central work of Merton's artistic life, Kramer devotes three chapters to it. Around these core chapters he arranges three complementary chapters on the prose works so that the complex interrelationships between Merton's genres and his steady development as an artist is revealed. Though this sounds cumbersome, the movement of the book is clearly presented, and careful attention to the overlapping chronology will reward the reader with a sense of Merton's progress. It will also suggest that while continued study of Merton's social themes and mystical theology remains important, these themes should not be studied apart from his poetry, for it is in the poetry that his vision is most concrete and incarnate.

In the chapter on the early poetry Kramer picks up on two unifying principles which he identifies in his introduction. First he sees Merton as called to a dual vocation: monk and poet, and second he sees him as one concerned with language. He calls him "a monk trying to find God through language." According to Kramer, Merton's early poems demonstrate how fully Gethsemani had become his home. They also demonstrate his movement away from the world.

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Merton's situation, as revealed in his poems became paradoxical. Writing, his means of saying how he was at home, became an obstacle to being at home. In "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," the essay appended to *Figures for an Apocalypse*, Merton faced the possibility of giving up poetry.

Though Merton quickly published another book of poems, Kramer identifies the essay as marking a point of heightened tension in Merton's understanding of his dual vocation, and he switches his attention to Merton's prose in a chapter called "Writing and Meditating for Others." Most of the works discussed in this chapter, which covers the years 1949 through 1961, are historical, meditative, or social in their concerns, "all work together to show Merton's increasing awareness of contemporary man's needs." *The Sign of Jonas*, an autobiographical work is an exception to this rule. Clearly a writer's journal, *Jonas*, records Merton's resolution of the conflict stated in the essay and poems of *Figures for an Apocalypse*.

In the central chapter of the book, "Middle Years and Decision," Kramer backs up in his chronology to 1948, returns to the issue of poetry and contemplation, and shows how the tension between the two affected the nature and the quality of Merton's verse. In *The Tears of Blind Lions* Merton makes poetry out of his difficulty. When he treats the subject abstractly, he is conventional and even contrived. But when he builds his poems on his specific experiences and on the observed landscape about him, he is successful, "He suggests the wonder of what he is experiencing." Perhaps the most interesting section of this chapter is Kramer's discussion of the usually neglected "The Tower of Babel." Here he brings together the threads of his unifying principles. He writes, "In this book, and in Merton's career, the verse play seems to be a pivotal work; it looks back to the early themes and forward to themes that will become of increasing importance. Above all, Merton concentrates on Man's contortions of language...." The play also marks a transition in Merton's attitude toward the world; compassion, not condemnation, begins to dominate.

From this central point of resolution, Kramer moves to two chapters on Merton's prose, "Movement Closer to the World" and "East as Support for the West." These chapters trace Merton's maturing to the point where he "seems to be saying...men must honor the world, not abstractions; they must learn to see life whole." Kramer recognizes that these works are important for their own sakes, but in keeping with the scheme of his book he directs his discussion of them to the way Merton's growing acumen as a social critic and interpreter of Zen contributes to the final integrated vision, both thematic and technical, of his late book-length poems, *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*.

Kramer's explications of these poems in the chapter "Experimental Poetry" are the most detailed readings of any he does in the book. He surveys the work already done on these poems, particularly that done by Luke Flaherty, Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, and James York Glimm, but he comes to his own conclusions. For example he argues that *Cables to the Ace* is best read as a collection of poems rather than as a single poem. Though ultimately I do not agree with him on this point, his cogent, stimulating argument is a good corrective to readings that find a more conscious unity in the work than might be there.

In 1974 Dennis McNerny, another critic who has written widely on Merton, published *Thomas Merton: the Man and His Work*, a survey comparable in scope to the one currently under review. In his chapter on the poetry, "The Fleeting Muse," McNerny wrote, "Anti-poetry was a deliberate and conscious abuse of language. Meaning was sent scurrying to the battlements and promptly put under siege.... How could one describe the end results of this experiment? In all, pretty bad. What we see in the *Cables to the Ace* is the loss of wholeness without which no literary work can make pretensions toward poetry." He concludes his chapter by assigning Merton the status of a minor poet. The structure of Kramer's book stands in opposition to this conclusion. I applaud him for that. As I reflect on the book, however, I wish he had taken more risk and made the implicit value judgment of his structure explicit in his conclusions. I probably ask too much. Fewer than twenty years have passed since the publication of the late poems. Kramer has given us much to think on.