

GEORGE WOODCOCK
THOMAS MERTON: MONK AND POET: A CRITICAL STUDY
(Vancouver, Canada: Douglas and McIntyre, 1978) 200pp.
by
George Kilcourse

The debut of this most recent critical Merton study appropriately coincided with the May 11-14 Thomas Merton Symposium at Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia. And Canadian litterateur George Woodcock has focused an important lens on the essential Merton: monk and poet. The timeliness of his perspective is further enhanced by the publication of The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton during the past year.

As we make the circuit of ten years since Merton's death, Woodcock's thesis refreshes: "In the intimate journals which Merton wrote throughout his life and in his poems, even more than in his didactic and quasi-theological writings, one finds the witness to life, as against the rejection of the world, constantly exemplified . . ." (p. 41) In the wake of so many more narrow critical endeavors of Merton scholarship, Woodcock's gravitating back to the integral Merton experience as monk-poet affords a significant re-orientation for the decade's scholarly summary. In a sense, we are brought by Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet nearer to that much-needed Baedeker, or guidebook, that novices and the initiated beg for in confronting the sprawl of Merton enthusiasms.

Woodcock has accomplished what few of his predecessors control; he has savored the Merton canon and presented its most salient elements with a literary acumen. The neglect of serious attention to Merton's poetry in the past has lamed scholars; so too, failure to appreciate the "marginality" of the monastic stance has become a crucial eclipse. The pre-monastic poems of youth Woodcock measures as deepening the "impressions of inner experience" and conversion. In Chapter 3, "The Walls of Gethsemani," he critically locates what he terms "poetry of the choir," the works of Merton's formative years combining "conversational silence and liturgical sound," echoing and influenced by the poetry of the Psalms. The "poetry of the desert" develops as distinct and typical of the maturing Merton, man of "reclusion." These more laconic, imagistic poems reflect the contemplative, mystical experience of transformation Merton navigated in his existential monasticism. Structure and form wright a new idiom. The prelude to the searching antipoetic techniques of Cables to the Ace and The Geography of Logaire is born. Here, Woodcock's systematic beginnings of a Merton poetics vis-a-vis his Monasticism strikes new veins of research.

The great virtue of this book remains the critical reading of Merton texts. In addition to attending to the poetry, Woodcock offers sage analyses of New Seeds of Contemplation, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Raids on the Unspeakable, and Contemplation In A World of Action. While revering Merton's odyssey, he does not shy from identifying the rigid "young bigot" who later adopted the ecumenical equilibrium that ventured new frontiers in Asian spirituality. The concluding chapter, "The Call of Asia," is a fine critical analysis of his Asian ecumenism.

Woodcock's question of the Epilogue, "Was Thomas Merton an anachronism?" is a critical scrutiny. The historical perspective and insight he brings to the task reads well. His dialogue is unique, sharing also an English rural childhood, visits to Asian gurus and travels in Melanasia, personally encountering Cargo cults in 1972. George Woodcock's discovery of Merton is our gain: "I am not a Catholic; I am not even a practicing Christian, and though I acknowledge the unknown God, I suspect that my personal kind of deism might come near to what Merton thought of as atheism. Yet there are areas where understanding may flourish. Like Merton I am a poet . . ." (p.7).