

the Chinese scholar who aided him in the writing of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. It indicated that Wu recognized Merton's own spiritual growth. For Shannon it also suggests the illumination that Merton's life and writings bring to the vast numbers of readers who find him a lamp lighting the way for their own inner journeys.

REFLECTING THE LIGHT

Review of

William H. Shannon

SILENT LAMP: THE THOMAS MERTON STORY

Foreword by A. M. Allchin

New York: Crossroad, 1992

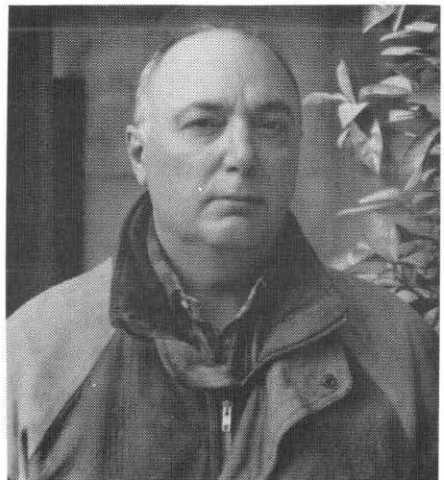
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Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

If only Robert Daggy, before sending me a review copy of William H. Shannon's *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, had first removed the book's jacket, he would have spared my becoming at first intimidated, but then challenged, as I read the jacket's list of lauds offered by a partial collection of the most solemnly professed in the community of Merton readers and interpreters for this new biography by one of their own. But now, having read *Silent Lamp*, I find their high praise merited. While I have an argument with a portion of the text's structure and its editing, I regard *Silent Lamp* an important addition to the corpus of biographical studies of Thomas Merton.

I am not writing this review in a vacuum. By the time this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* is in the hands

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JONATHAN MONTALDO

of subscribers, I have no doubt that many of them will have read and digested *Silent Lamp* for themselves. Thus this review only considers a few points and is a very partial assessment of Shannon's achievement.

Through my own experience of reading *Silent Lamp*, the necessity for Merton readers to have this "reflective biography," ("a look at the inner journey that alone gives meaning to the exterior one," p. 7), has become self-evident. Although Michael Mott's *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1984), in its attempt to be inclusive of all the major facts, in the light of its research and scholarship, and in the literary acumen of its author remains, and probably will remain, the classic "reference biography" of Thomas Merton, Mott's work does not cancel out the valuable contributions of Edward Rice's *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (1970); Monica Furlong's *Merton* (1980); Basil Pennington's *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk* (1987); David Cooper's *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial* (1989); or Jim Forest's *Living with Wisdom* (1992). Each of these biographers offers a unique perspective on Thomas Merton's life and literary career. Any attempt to ascertain which among them, including *Silent Lamp* is "the best, the most definitive, etc." would be unjust to each and all. Let ten thousand flowers bloom! I would only insist on the commonplace that each of these biographies is at best a "filter" through which the essence of Thomas Merton's life is (more in one, less in another) "strained" (I intend the pun). I prefer, then, to speak of Ed Rice's Merton, Monica Furlong's Merton, and now of William Shannon's Merton, for the Merton who was incarnated between the years 1915 and 1968 in word and deed was *the only definitive Thomas Merton*. Each "Merton study," no matter how nuanced and refined, is only an image of Thomas Merton reflected through another person's heart darkly.

Thus I confess the existence of Jonathan Montaldo's Merton, and Montaldo, in truth, could not wait to read this new biography, his weapons at the ready to skewer Shannon's Merton should the "real Thomas Merton" (read Montaldo's) be perceived in any of the following ways (to name only three):

1. Would Shannon regard Merton as a "saint"? Shannon writes of Merton as "a saint for our times" on page one no less! He states he even considered using this phrase as the biography's title (p. 2). (Get me the knife, my Thomas!)
2. Would Shannon refer to the so-called "visions" at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville and at the Buddhist statues at Polonnaruwa as major "turning points" in Merton's life? He describes the "theophany" on Fourth and Walnut on pp. 190-191 and Merton's being "jerked clean" at Polonnaruwa on pp. 276-279. (My broad sword, Louis!)
3. Would Shannon, because Merton was reading with profit Reza Arasteh's *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* at the beginning of 1968, assume we should regard Merton a "finally integrated" man after experiencing Asia, not only an "integrated" but a "transcultural" man? See p. 287. (I leaped for the ax myself!)

Yes, Shannon touched on all these points on which I am sensitive to protect my own image of Thomas Merton (I would answer "no" to all of the above), but Shannon's balance and even-handedness in discussing each of these questions won me over to his point of view, that is, made me drop my "life worn" perceptions of Merton and reopen myself to new questions. The integrity with which Shannon treats these three issues, bringing a brief of detailed evidence to his argument, is emblematic of his methodology throughout *Silent Lamp* (Cf. pp. 168-171, the "methodology of the question"). By reviewing more closely Shannon's methodology in his treatment, for example, of the "visions," the acuteness of his analytical achievements elsewhere throughout the biography can be extrapolated.

I address “the visions thing” because I have written elsewhere of my aversion to placing so much importance on these so-called “turning points” in Merton’s life. In August, 1989 I completed a facsimile transcription of an unpublished Merton holographic notebook under Robert Daggy’s direction at the Thomas Merton Studies Center. I appended an introduction to the transcription in which, among other things, I took up the matter of “the visions.” I quote myself here, not only to make my own position clear, but also to contrast my less integrated and more extreme position with Shannon’s balanced analysis:

With his death in 1968 a certain Merton exegesis has sought a certain and definitive closure upon his life and thought. Foreshadowings of his *denouement* are found as early as his 1948 autobiography — “That you may . . . learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.” Important transitions in Merton’s life are suggested as turning upon single moments of “Vision” (Fourth and Walnut). No doubt the need for such clear and decisive closures, when examining our own or another person’s life, is an ubiquitously human mental trait, but we humans too often identify our “need to close” as the “necessary pattern of the truth.” To this consistent demand of our intellects to find closure, a disconcerting chaos prowling the ground of our lives just as consistently refuses to acquiesce. Just when we think it is safe to go back in the water, just when we believe the world is finally our oyster, and just when we know we have “definitively” arrived at a new plateau of spiritual development, then comes the shark, then our market crashes, and then we behold the resurrection of our original sin’s unbloodied and unbowed head.

Merton’s recording of his “moment at Polonnaruwa,” where in the sight of Buddhist monuments everything for him is suddenly jerked “clear” and “clean,” can be misidentified as Merton’s “transfiguration,” if not his *apotheosis*, before he moves on to Bangkok and sudden death. These occasions of Merton’s “insight” we label “Fourth and Walnut” and “Polonnaruwa” are but two of a multitude of insightful moments which Merton experienced in his life and recorded to the page. While it is indeed true that these moments *do* appear to Merton himself as “definitive moments of clarity,” moments which somehow justify, because they seem to transcend, his endless inner struggle with contradiction, the character of these Merton “insights” remains closely related to what Bernard of Clairvaux regretted about his own moments of *ecstasis*: “How rare the visits, how brief the stay!”

Through a methodology which I now see is no more than “rhetorical assertion” it’s clear I do not attach any lasting importance, as indicating “stages having been conquered,” to Merton’s “moments of insight.” William Shannon, on the other hand, treats the question with much more thorough and realistic finesse: he acknowledges the shadows but searches for the light.

He situates “the vision at Fourth and Walnut” within the events of an important year of change in Merton’s life — 1958 — when the question of “mission as the fruit of contemplation” became paramount for Merton (p. 179). In fact, Shannon discusses “the vision” reluctantly, almost as a concession to the fact that the paragraph in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* has been quoted *ad nauseam* (my words, not Shannon’s). While he views “the vision” as a major signal of an inner change in Merton, he notes that such major signals have been preceded by less obvious signals which are just as important “moments of conversion,” “times of fresh insight,” and “events of deepening consciousness” (p. 7). Fourth and Walnut is not for Shannon *the defining moment* of 1958, but one moment of realization prepared by equally significant events:

- a. Merton’s “mission statement” to Pope John XXIII;
- b. the Merton-Pasternak dialogue;
- c. an intellectual relationship with his novice Ernesto Cardenal;
- d. Merton’s preparing himself to join in ecumenical conversations with visiting Protestant theologians/ teachers and their students; and
- e. Merton’s heavy reading in Zen Buddhism.

Shannon mines each event in detail to substantiate his perception that 1958 was the year Thomas Merton “returned to the world” (see Chapter 10, pp. 178-191).

On the question of the “vision at Polonnaruwa” I quote Shannon’s analysis at length because it is so penetratingly (making this reader feel it is so obviously) “right”:

As I have suggested, this experience of Thomas Merton at Polonnaruwa has puzzled many readers and writers. One can make too much of it, or too little. Clearly it was a significant moment in his life. He speaks about “piercing through the surface,” about “seeing,” about “discovering,” and about “clarity.” Was it a unique moment of sudden and unexpected enlightenment without precedent in his life? I think not. My reason for saying so is that there are other events, already noted in this book, where Merton uses similar language. At Polonnaruwa he said: “I have seen what I was obscurely looking for.” When he was in Rome in 1933, he visited the remains of an old church near the palace of Caligula and discovered a Byzantine fresco of the crucifixion. He was suddenly awed and surprised to find this was something he recognized and understood. “Something,” he says, “I had been looking for.” Likewise, he makes a similar statement when in 1953 he was allowed to use as his temporary hermitage an old toolshed that he named St. Anne’s. “It seems to me,” he writes, “that St. Anne’s is what I have been waiting for and looking for all my life.” Again, in April 1965 when he was spending most of his time in the hermitage that he would occupy in August of that year, he wrote to Ernesto Cardenal about life in the hermitage: “I have found what I have always been looking for.” *Something I have been looking for* is a Merton signature for moments of profound experience.

Throughout *Silent Lamp* William Shannon again and again collates events in Merton’s life which were years, if not decades, apart into a new and unified perception of basic patterns in Merton’s experience. On the questions of what ways Merton could be considered “a saint” or “an integrated man,” I found Shannon no less masterful.

But in case I be accused of being “unduly awed,” *Silent Lamp* is, to my mind at least, not without its problems. First, his “Chronologies” are effective when they list specific events in Merton’s life, usually by date, and when he lists the year of publication of Merton’s major works. (What Shannon does is place his “footnotes” within the Chronologies and thus he avoids the scholarly mechanics which could mar the nature of his text as a “reflective biography” for a large audience. The back-of-the-book notes are, in fact, sparse.) My problem with the Chronologies is the inclusion of historical data which relates Merton’s life to international events of his time. I found this data most distracting and tended to skip it the further in the Chronologies I read. For the “Publications” section of his annual Chronologies, Shannon never explains his reason for including five or six publications per year by other authors nor the basis for selecting those he chose. True, the Publications became more effective when Merton’s publications begin to be included with the others Shannon names, but I mostly felt I had been invited to a game for which I had not been given the rules.

Secondly, I found two important “moments” in the text where I felt Shannon’s editor(s) failed him and allowed him to “poop out.” At the end of a beautifully written and informative analysis of “the gift of Merton’s monastic vocation at Gethsemani” (Chapter 8), Shannon begins to discuss “one of the best, most insightful articles Merton ever wrote” — “Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude” — when he suddenly breaks his stride, despairs “of even attempting to summarize it or of choosing a quotation that might do so.” But then he gives one long quote anyway, and ends with: “Perhaps the best advice that I can give the reader at this point is to read the essay in its entirety. It will tell you a lot about solitude that perhaps we all need to hear. A lot about Thomas Merton too” (pp. 159-160). This strikes me as much too easy a surrender at the end of a long day. And to make matters worse, instead of ending on even this weak note, Shannon then goes on to guide his readers as to how they might find Merton’s essays in a comprehensive bibliography. This guidance should have been relegated to the Notes section in the back, not at the end of what is a very finely executed chapter.

I am also sorry to report that a second “moment of exhaustion” occurs in the very last sentence of the biography’s conclusion: “Thomas Merton chafed at times at the confinement imposed by what he considered unreasonable or meaningless demands on the part of the monastic institution and its discipline, but he was, more and more as time went on, a *free spirit for he was in touch with the universe.*”

I do not think the author of *Silent Lamp* would agree with himself on what appears in this statement to be his last word on Thomas Merton: a free spirit confined (as one is confined in prison) in a *meaningless* monastic discipline? And was Thomas Merton really “in touch with the universe”? What does *that* mean? I am not trying to be cute: the concluding sentence smacks of being an unreflected-upon throw-away line that “seemed to sound good.” It is a jarring note on which to end an exceptionally careful biography. During one of the numerous reprintings *Silent Lamp* will surely enjoy, perhaps Shannon will review and adjust that last line.

I doubt *Silent Lamp* is the last biography we shall have of Thomas Merton. After all Merton’s letters and journals are published, the Merton life is certain to be reviewed. A wealth of illuminating detail does remain to be exposed, but no matter how much evidence is amassed, I still believe we wait in vain for a “definitive biography” of Thomas Merton. For the definitive Thomas Merton has risen (let us hope) alleluia.

Shannon is perceptive when he writes that Thomas Merton continues through his books to be a “spiritual father” to many. Differently for each individual, Merton continues to guide and touch lives. And I gather many persons feel they owe a debt to Thomas Merton and they try to repay it by visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani, by spending a moment at his grave, by looking out over the knobs from the porch of his hermitage, or, should none of this be possible, reading the latest book about him. Though understandable, none of these acts of homage is necessary (Merton is no longer in any of these places nor within the pages of any book). There are better ways to repay a continuing debt. William Shannon might agree with Robert Coles that: “The debt to the past is (best) acknowledged by the assumption of personal responsibility, by an effort of self-assertion worth a hundred sterile vows of obedience to the dead master.”¹

Or, at least, Shannon should agree since, by gifting us with his best reflection of Thomas Merton, William H. Shannon, priest, writer and teacher, has more than repaid his debt to “the old man.” Acknowledging the right of each to their own response, I publicly greet the arrival of *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* with a *definitive* and profound bow of respect.

1. Robert Coles, *Erik H. Erikson: The Growth of His Work* (Boston, 1970).