

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK: A CELEBRATORY SECOND RECEPTION FOR THE MERTON ANNUAL'S "NEW CRITICAL TURN"

Review of
The Merton Annual 7
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Reviewed by **Jonathan Montaldo**

"Commentary is without end."

—George Steiner, *Real Presences*

As the dark blue suit I had brought with me no longer fit, I approached Hayes Dining Hall on the campus of St. Bonaventure's in Olean, New York for the banquet of the Fourth ITMS Meeting in a casual white linen shirt and the ragged washed-out green khakis which I had worn all day and at least once a week for the last six years. It was my fate to encounter directly the Thomas Merton Center's Dr. Daggy perfectly pressed out in suit, tie and signature suspenders. His amused eyes gave my costume a once-over. I held his glance, as if to assert, "I pride myself on not projecting an air of sophistication." Robert E. Daggy smiled slightly as he turned away, as if to retort, "Congratulations, Jonathan, I don't feel the slightest breeze!"

If the Merton readership is divided between George Kilcourse's categories of "scholars" and "Merton aficionados," this vignette undoubtedly proves I run with that latter, larger pack of hounds. But I do have a gift for appreciating what I am not and it's through this grace for recognizing "the Other" that I happily report *The Merton Annual 7* is a beautifully dressed-out, sophisticated addition to critical Merton studies and will reward scrutiny. Victor Kramer comfortably mans the helms; Michael Downey shepherds a good variety of reviews and a noteworthy review-symposium of *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*; and George Kilcourse produces a sharp and superbly crafted bibliographical review-essay for 1993.

Volume 7 is the editorial trio's second outing. *The Merton Annual 6* was an iron glove to the face of meta-Mertonizers, that is, any Merton reader who approaches the monk and poet solely as an icon of their private spiritual obsessions. I, as the glove fits me, have accepted this salutary blow to my right cheek but believe the trio overplayed their hands and unduly distanced themselves from the rank-and-file Merton audience. The editors accomplished their distancing by first dividing the Merton readership into the starched academics and the unwashed masses. Secondly, they force-fed us articles which were cooked at the sterile kitchens (or so it seems to one not there) of both a Gethsemani "Abbey Center Conference" and a nine-person "Scholars Retreat" at the Abbey. More than a couple of said articles were so precious that they ought to have been shared, like Socrates's discourse before drinking hemlock, only among the few. In the face of Volume 7, however, I am persuaded to vie Volume 6 as a diplomatically stumbling but purposeful inaugural effort. I happily report that these three fine scholars, calling for a "critical turn in Merton studies," are now, only one volume later, hitting their stride and walking their talk. Since I am aware of the babbling sound George Steiner

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would make in my ear were he sitting next to me as I commence to comment upon commentary, I shall restrict myself to celebrating only a trinity of articles in *The Merton Annual 7* which represents the tone of critical excellence struck throughout the entire volume.

Mary Murray in “The Fire Watch Epilogue and *Life and Holiness: Opposing Rhetorics in the Writings of Thomas Merton*” produces a seminal distinction between a fact-driven “rhetoric of logic” alone and a “rhetoric of exploration,” which touches values and emotions, for use in analyzing the literary effectiveness of Merton’s writing. Limiting herself to a cursory but stimulating analysis of only two rhetorically opposed Merton texts, Murray provides a means of discovering the secret within his language for Merton’s inciting his reader’s full-hearted identification with his literary *persona*. Murray’s rhetorical analysis reminded me of Abraham J. Heschel’s contrasting a “language of essence” and a “language of presence” in *The Prophets*. Merton, too, when writing at his best, utilized a language of presence by emphasizing an emotional and value-laden enactment of his experience rather than a logical analysis of it. His art aims at eclipsing the perceptual distances between himself and his reader. Merton writes to bait, hook and eat.

The distinguished scripture scholar and major presence for colleagues in the field of academic spirituality, Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM, examines Merton’s effectiveness as a cultural spokesperson in “Merton, Friend of God and Prophet.” Schneiders, like Murray, is intrigued at Merton’s continuing popularity and tentatively decides Merton has deeply mined “a feature of our culture that is rarely overt but that is very deep, namely, a kind of agonized obsession with transcendence.” Merton’s writing for Schneiders patterns how twentieth century culture keeps “the God issue alive as an ache if not as an articulated question.” Merton’s rhetorical restlessness, Schneiders and Murray might both say, mirrors current western culture’s. Merton articulates what many of his cultural cohorts deeply and uneasily sense but are dumb to express. In Merton’s best writing out common voids become visible.

I call on my gift for recognizing “the Other” when I declare the new President of the ITMS, Patrick F. O’Connell, a brilliant scholar. His analysis of Merton’s venture into poetry for a musical setting, “Eight Freedom Songs: Merton’s Sequence of Liberation,” is magisterial. O’Connell brings scriptural resources, his wide-ranging reading over the entire Merton text, and his reading of the critical literature on Merton by others to bear on these eight integrated poems which “within the accepted limits of their genre, can be considered both artistically successful and spiritually challenging.” O’Connell himself utilizes a rhetoric of exploration through which he does not simply state the importance of these songs as literature but proves it by both an emotionally engaged and intellectually stimulating presentation. If Patrick F. O’Connell is representative of a “new critical turn” in Merton studies, I recommend we cruise into it with deliberate speed.

Finally, I note for *The Merton Seasonal* readership that George Kilcourse, recipient of an ITMS “Louie” award in June for a distinguished book on Thomas Merton, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ*, is an architect of constructive critical questions. Kilcourse’s essay on 1993 in Merton scholarship and publication deserves study. Here is a paraphrase of only three on many insightful questions in his essay: What change in perspective occurs when we identify Merton’s monastic vocation as a continuing move toward “marginality” and away from a “simulated and juridical monasticism?” What change in perspective occurs when we view the contemplative dimension of Merton’s life as many-angled and more universal than a reductive identification of contemplation with a monastic *ascesis*. And, thirdly, what kind of *autobiographical truth* should we accord the varied Merton genres of journals, letters, poetry, and working-notebooks, as well as personal memoirs of Merton by close friends, like the poet Ron Seitz, whose *Song for Nobody* is fast becoming a popular and classic example? More constructively than destructively [G.K. once again calls unnamed Merton readers *aficionados*] Kilcourse provokes and stimulates. If Merton studies didn’t have a George Kilcourse, it would have to invent him. Kilcourse as gadfly serves us all well.

Having just re-read the above review, I am slightly appalled to find it reads more like love-mail than a justifiably surly response from a meta-Mertonizer scorned. I know the Lord commands me to turn the other cheek, but unmitigated praise from the Roaseanne Barr of Merton studies is suspicious! Doesn’t *The Merton Annual 8* appear next spring, 1996? By next spring I could easily resurrect myself for another critical outing. In the meantime let all Merton “scholars” contemplate just how pleasant it can be when a rabid *aficionado* comes to the banquet in sheep’s clothing.