

*THE MILCOM MEMORIAL  
READING ROOM*

*AND*

*ATTENTION LIBRARY*

OF THE

**ESTHETICAL SOCIETY**

*for TRANSCENDENTAL and APPLIED REALIZATION  
(now incorporating the SOCIETY of ESTHETIC REALIZERS)*



*A special supplement to the Proceedings*

*“Souvenir Programs and Pamphlets”*

*(In continuation of “Contributions on the ‘W’ Cache and Related Sources”)*

Documents Ostensibly Pertaining to the Origins and Development of  
“The Order of the Third Bird”

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*The Editorial Board of ESTAR(SER) would like to acknowledge the support of its longstanding benefactors (Anonymous, Anonymous, and Anonymous) and the gracious cooperation of the Trustees of the Milcom Estate, Easter McCraney, and the Members of the Committee on Archival Installations.*



THE MILCOM MEMORIAL  
READING ROOM  
AND  
ATTENTION LIBRARY

An Installation and Working Archive  
at  
MANA CONTEMPORARY



2018

THE MILCOM MEMORIAL READING ROOM  
AND ATTENTION LIBRARY  
of ESTAR(SER)

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About ESTAR(SER): *The Esthetical Society for Transcendental and Applied Realization (now incorporating the Society of Esthetic Realizers)* is an established body of private, independent scholars and amateurs who work collectively to recover, scrutinize, and (where relevant) draw attention to the historicity of the Order of the Third Bird.

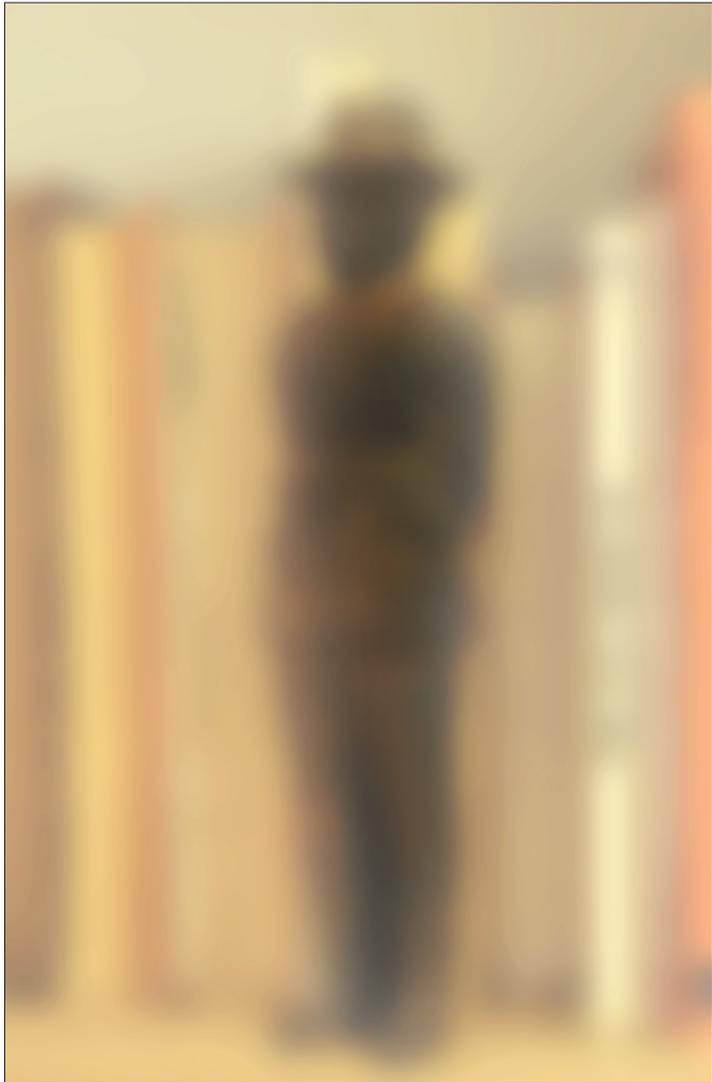
*About the Order of the Third Bird:* There remains some confusion about the history and practices of the body known as The Order of the Third Bird, but evidence points to its having been for some time a loose network of cell-like groups that engage in ritualized forms of sustained attention to works of art. The canons of secrecy around these activities — their structure and purposes — have traditionally been sufficiently restrictive as to leave some doubt as to whether any individual professing intimacy with the Order could in fact be genuinely associated therewith.

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<sup>†</sup> Trustees residing more than fifty miles from New York City.

ON THE OCCASION of the installation of the Milcom Memorial Reading Room and Attention Library at Mana Contemporary, in Jersey City, the trustees saw fit to invite a distinguished associate of ESTAR(SER), Dr. Easter McCraney, to offer reflections on the life and times of Learned (aka Lennard) "Hogfoot" Milcom (1928-1972) and the bequest that formed the seed of the present Reading Room. Her thoughtful essay, "Milcom the Metagnome," follows in these pages, and we are grateful to her for her contribution. We will do well to take a moment to mention thanks to Catherine L. Hansen and her colleagues in the "Milcom Shelfmark" Working Group, who are in the process of a full and scholarly treatment of the available documentation (the "Milcom Shelfmark Folder") that deals with the Milcom Estate and the conveyance of the library itself (and its small collections of artifacts and ephemera) to the Editorial Committee of ESTAR(SER); it is to be hoped that this study will come to wider public attention in the *Proceedings* in the near future. Further appreciation is due to Alison Burstein, without whose vision and tenacity the present reanimation of the Milcom milieu could hardly be imagined. Anyone familiar with the history of the Order in Jersey City (see, inter alia, *Echoes of the Aesthetic Society of Jersey City* [New York: Thompson and Moreau, 1882] and the discussion thereof in the *Communiqués of ESTAR[SER]* of 21 March 2016) must be especially touched to see Birdish materials so prominently on display again on ground of genuine significance to the propagation of attentional practices in the Americas in the last century and a half. For that opportunity, the community of ESTAR(SER) wishes to acknowledge with gratitude the generous hospitality of Mana Contemporary.

D. Graham Burnett



# MILCOM THE METAGNOME

by Easter McCraney

I write this remembrance under the generous wing of my beloved ESTAR(SER) and of the Milcom Shelfmark Working Group, led by C. Leigh Hansen – let their work prosper. That we may look around and discover ourselves in this beautiful Reading Room, we owe not only to the lifetime efforts of “Hogfoot” Milcom, but also to his visionary successors.

Given the centrality of Milcom’s work to what we do, it is quite astonishing how little we still know about him – especially for those, like us, who take pride in prising evidence and relevance from the most intractable soil. I will summarize here what we do know about him, and give some small voice to what he was like as a person, and what mattered to him. I have been involved with ESTAR(SER), which he singlehandedly revived and set on its present course, for many years, and I have seen it through its well-known litany of reformations. I knew Milcom (a strange thing to find oneself saying, about a figure half made of myth), and many of the rumors that still circulate about him are based on events that I either witnessed firsthand or helped him fabricate outright. I would, in this context, like to take this opportunity to, as it were, “come clean”– to my peers (some of them, perhaps, of imperfect cleanliness), as well as to a more general audience. It is time to share some basic truths.

When I first met Milcom, it was in 1964, in his first-floor office in a building right next to the city hall in Spanish Fort, Alabama, where I’d been unhappily clerking. It was the HQ of the “new series” of the *Proceedings of ESTAR(SER)* – the new editor-in-chief was Sonny Kirkeyard (whose subsequent Hollywood career we all followed with some excitement), but Milcom was still very much involved in decision-making. Next to that office, at the end of the hall, under lock and key, was where he kept what he called the “W-Cache,” a collection of materials related to the history of the Order of the Third Bird, and only he and Sonny ever went in. The only spots of color in his office were the five or six chiffon veils of various bright tints, some draped over his chair plus the two or three he had on, covering his face in layers. He always did that while he was working at his desk. He claimed it was to help with something relating to his eyesight, which because of a long-

term illness was a delicate matter – but I also think it suited him. It had a very striking effect when combined with the candlelight by which he liked to do his writing. In that way he had of being at once erudite and a bit corn-pone, he called them “Bacon’s candles,” in reference to the line in Francis Bacon where “truth is a naked and open daylight, that doth not show the masks, and mummeries, and triumphs of the world, half so stately and daintily as candlelights.”

ESTAR(SER) researchers still often come to me asking me for details of Milcom’s biography and oeuvre, or for answers to pressing research questions, given the monumental influence he has had on the study of the Order in our time. It is true that I became one of his closer friends, yet I am no more privy to the “facts” of his life than these others are, and am richer only in personal anecdote. He was very private – if he had a love life, for example, it must have been carried out in the dead of night on a private island, for all anyone knew about it. I am quite sorry to say that the rumors about the two of us had no basis in fact (one might have said that they had, nonetheless, a basis in truth). When I write about his life, I can only trust what he chose to say, and do not rely on the various attempts that have recently been made (in town records, newspapers, and yearbooks) to make him speak beyond the grave, in a voice not his own.

Milcom was a small-town boy of no gifts or training (he claimed) in the arts of graceful living, who yearned (I imagine) for a bright faery world of arts and letters beyond the horizon. The date he most frequently gave for his birth was 1928; his given name was “Learned,” after his great-grandfather Learned Melchom, but as a child he went by “Lennard,” in his youthful spelling. There were also plenty of origin stories going around for the name “Hogfoot,” but he never bothered to make any of them believable. Milcom’s greatest gifts were as a researcher, archivist, and bibliophile. He was the ur-ESTAR(SER)ian, in a company of great and sparkling minds. But everyone has teachers, and his gifts were first allowed to flourish in the course of his inaugural encounter with real employment. Instead of matriculating at Alabama Polytechnic Institute (where his father taught mechanical engineering), he answered an advertisement – and for reasons he never explained, was hired – to work as a personal librarian to an old Friulian family in a rundown former palace in Muggia, Trieste, all moving expenses paid. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, but what was supposed to be a lifetime post ended because of a personal disagreement with a middle

son of the family, and after fourteen months he was let go with about a hundred books (I suppose today we would call it a “severance package”); most duplicates, but some quite valuable. Many of them ended up in the W-Cache – which still, of course, exists, and is stewarded by a rotating cadre of ESTAR(SER) researchers. At least two volumes, however, he kept in his personal collection, which he did not wish to be “annexed,” as he put it, by the Cache. One was a rare work by the Slovenian-Italian autodidact and medium Kaspar Koper, “On the Imitation of Art” (*Della Imitazione dell’arte* [sic], 1889), and the other was a first edition of the latter-day alchemist Fulcanelli’s *Le Mystère des Cathédrales*, whose esoteric “language of the birds” had been all the rage in twenties Paris.

But as Milcom told it, it was a book he wasn’t given that proved the most determining influence for him, and one that is now lost, perhaps for good: we know it as the *Memorials of the Order of the Third Bird*.<sup>1</sup> When he came across this book in the Muggia library, he was so struck by it – by the idea of a secret society of hysterical aesthetes devoted to the personally and collectively metamorphic potential of sustained attention to works of art – that he set out thoroughly to research its contents and provenance. This led him, eventually and inevitably, to the work of ESTAR(SER), which exists solely to document and to “historiate” the Order (the latter is a favorite word among our researchers, and was first popularized by Milcom). ESTAR(SER) was, at that time, scattered and in disarray, and it possessed no full accounting of its accumulated output. Thus, in investigating ESTAR(SER), Milcom – in a manner of speaking – “created” it. In this sense, as in many others, he inspires and anticipates our own ongoing work.

It was around 1948, then, that Milcom began methodically to gather together everything that ESTAR(SER) had ever produced, from the loosely Oxbridgian beginnings of ESTAR and the bohemian milieu of SER (they had started as two separate groups) to their midcentury interregna. He found all the obscure single-issue journals and pamphlets, the ephemera and clippings, the lecture flyers and letters, in personal collections, neglected archives, and dour and closely guarded institutions. His far from modest goal was to reprint them all together in one collection, but his real

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: the full title was *Memorials of the Most Noble Order of the Third Bird, from its Foundation to the Present Time, including the History of the Order; the Chronological Succession of the Members; and many curious particulars relating to Birdish usages from hitherto unpublished documents*. Its likely late eighteenth-century publication date and author, and the greater part of its contents, remain unknown.

ambitions were even greater: not only to bring this scholarly community – in its own way just as secretive and skittish as the Order itself – back together, but also to make himself a central and indispensable part of it. It was, in fact, a grandiose undertaking, and he lacked many of the resources needed for it, but his was a grandiose mind, and he was very good at convincing people to do things for him.

His task was also one that required a sharp eye and a great deal of imagination. ESTAR(SER) had, as I said, entered a period of disestablishment in which, having ceased collective publication, it had gone underground in rather diasporic fashion, and in many cases disguised or camouflaged its productions. In the *Journal of Miscellaneous Intelligence* in the twenties, for example, though it was entirely dedicated to research on the Order, neither the Order nor any of its key terms (Protocol, Action, Phase) were ever mentioned. And while Milcom was still at work on his great compendium, several former research sub-associates of ESTAR(SER) had temporarily taken over the ornithological magazine *Nebraska Bird Review* in 1955 and had managed to shoehorn the bulk of their discoveries into the standard terms and tools of that discipline. “The Cooperative Study of Bird Migration,” for example, which appeared in the first issue of that year, is a manifesto and a plea for the revival of the collaborative activity of ESTAR(SER) – but it took an interested eye, a desirous eye, and perhaps even (by that time) an obsessed one to reveal its true nature. For related reasons, it is possible that many of the materials included in Milcom’s 1963 magnum opus, *The Ballad of ESTAR & SER*, are, or at least were, apocryphal. “Were,” because, having since formed the basis for further and brilliant research, they have ridden into the canon, as it were, on its coattails.

Milcom had tried unsuccessfully to place the four volumes of the *Ballad* with various publishers, but in the end printed and bound several sets privately – all three of these “full” sets (they are, by tradition, lettered A through C, and unfortunately they are not perfectly identical) are now held in the W-Cache. He then wrote personally to many of the former luminaries of ESTAR(SER), many of whom turned out to be pseudonyms, or altogether fictional. Among the reclusive savants and scholarly dilettantes who responded to Milcom’s call, there were also those whose names were coincidentally identical to the far-fetched pseudonym of some deceased or apostate ESTAR(SER)ian, and who – delighted to find themselves addressed in such high-minded and conspiratorial fashion – wrote in with declara-

tions of bemused fealty, and tentative new textual offerings. Thus the *Ballad*, at a distance, had a galvanizing effect: from all these scattered organs of knowledge, a new organism took shape and rose up to serve a single cause. New work was commissioned, membership swelled (a modest swelling, like a desiccated succulent in the wake of a good spring shower), and a gleaming new *Proceedings* (1963-1972) – though it in no sense “hit the shelves” – set a new standard for esoteric work on impossible subjects. Under a succession of editors, each highly eccentric in his or her own way, this robust scholarly collective might have survived anything, save for the death of Milcom himself, in 1972, at the age of 44. With his death also came the end of the small commune, comprising a row of log cabins and a small farm near Asheville, NC, that the “generation of ’63” had established – an experiment which, oddly enough, had had its start in Milcom’s monthly, and then weekly, backyard “salons,” which he presided over with the lordly title “Beylerbey.”

I was with Milcom on the second to last day of his short and mighty life; I do not know who it was that joined him, and spoke with him, on his last. The last words I heard him speak were of the W-Cache. This huge and strange collection of Bird-related documents and objects must not be confused with Milcom’s personal library, comprising books of what he called “merely personal” significance, as well as works on the physiology, psychology, phenomenology, poetry, alchemy, and communality of the faculty of attention – a topic that the elusive “Birds” of the Order of the Third Bird never dealt with in any academic, scholarly, or even coherent fashion, though they lived and breathed it. The personal collection included gifts given to him by ESTAR(SER)ians, one of which was the “chess set” now appearing in the Reading Room, which is of course actually a tableau of sustained Birdish attention to a work of art. Though this item featured in a 2016 Los Angeles exhibition of objects from the W-Cache – all of which have now found a home at Mana – this was an error on the part of those who assembled that show and its related documentation.

It is impossible to gain any sort of familiarity with the work of ESTAR(SER) without hearing a rash of contradictory accounts and myths of the origins and indeed the nature of the W-Cache. Milcom was its first steward – and he was also, I believe, the last person to know the true story of its origin, if such can be said to exist. It was one of the sub-editors of the *Proceedings* who invented the unaccountably popular story of the “ice cream truck” driven by a nun (sometimes by a swami, and sometimes by a nun *and*

a swami) that delivered the Cache to Milcom's doorstep. Around the same time there was a flowering of myths and theories and cosmic musings about the Cache (likely encouraged by Milcom himself) as a living, metabolic, growing, or psychoactive and mutagenic, or possibly infinite entity or substance. It does seem that on 16 March 1967 Milcom (as he told it) found himself in receipt of a major and anonymous bequest which transformed the collection of materials he had amassed in search of ESTAR(SER) (and, of course, of the Order itself) into a major instrument and locus of research. Who was the donor? Some other historian, who had not managed to accomplish what Milcom had, and who had gracefully stepped aside? Was it someone he had known amid the tumbledown finery of his youthful adventures? Or, those who are more skeptical than I might allege that the Cache had never been more than his own humble cabinet of personal wonders, dressed up with tales of mystery and imagination, whose myth he maintained in order to maintain his own myth. These might go so far as to insinuate that what we have here, in the Reading Room and Attention Library, amounts to the W-Cache itself made visible (in the manner of a deep-sea fish whose fine structure collapses when brought to light).

People say all manner of things. Let us simply state what is clearly true: what we have before us in this high-ceilinged and windowless room is a finite number of books and objects that Milcom wished to be of use both to long-term colleagues and to potential ones. After his death I took care of his collection, for a time. I gave parts of it away, and had parts of it returned to me. New material was, in an irregular manner, "accessioned" – which is to concede that there is no small measure of material in the present installation of the Milcom Library that is not, I must insist, Milcom's in any way (as will be obvious even to a casual and relatively innocent visitor). I do not believe this would have bothered him very much, since he intended his library not as some sort of sacred object, but as a question.

I will try to explain what I mean by this. Milcom believed that if one devotes certain forms of attention to a library (or, he sometimes added, to any body of knowledge), it will reciprocate, sometimes in startling ways. Sometimes, for instance, when we got together, he was endlessly, childishly delighted by games of bibliomancy – flipping open random books to random pages and lines, seeking solutions to quotidian problems. He always found them. But I suppose that the real question he meant to pose is something like what he said to me one evening, a year before his death, and which

I've always remembered. Its idealism is perhaps of its time – or perhaps it is my own, since I am quoting from memory. “We know things, we experience things,” he said, “but what do we do it for? What is the use of a knowledge, of an experience? The answer has to be not *What For?* but *For Whom?* We know and experience things because that gives us new ways of being together. But it's pretty hard to do that too, to translate knowing and experiencing into new, and maybe better, ways of being together. Maybe I am chasing the Birds because of what they represent. Not making and exchanging more things, but *being* more things, and *being* more things with others. More, anyway, than what the powers-that-be try to limit us to.”



The Milcom Memorial Reading Room and Attention Library is, to be sure, a collection of wonderful, or potentially wonderful, things. But it can also be consciously taken as a creative challenge. The often very weird markings, marginalia, and categorizations that Milcom left in the books, in particular, are, I believe, meant as guideposts in that direction; I personally see them as names for the passions, correspondences, communal labors, and composite beings that the great Charles Fourier (himself, it seems certain, an associate of the Birds) never got around to imagining.

I hope that visitors to this space will take the liberty to imagine it in their own way.

## NOTES